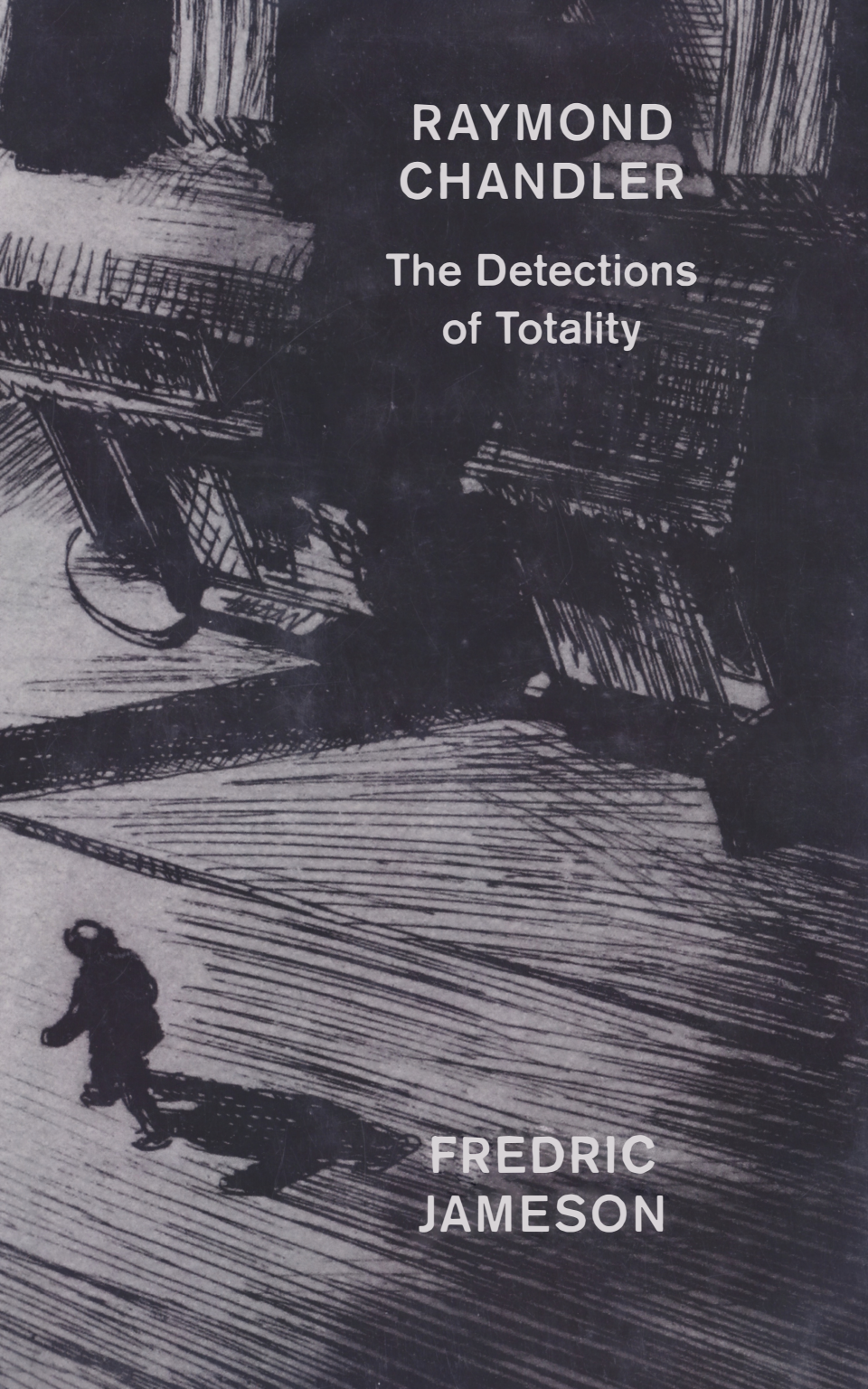

RAYMOND CHANDLER

The Detections of Totality

FREDRIC JAMESON

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VERSO
London • New York

First published by Verso 2016
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201
versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-78478-216-0
ISBN-13: 978-1-78478-215-3 (US EBK)
ISBN-13: 978-1-78478-217-7 (UK EBK)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jameson, Fredric.
Raymond Chandler : the detections of totality /
Fredric Jameson.
pages cm
ISBN 978-1-78478-216-0 (hardback)
1. Chandler, Raymond, 1888–1959—Criticism and
interpretation. I. Title.
PS3505.H3224Z676 2016
813'.52—dc23
2015029738

Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro by MJ&N Gavan, Truro, Cornwall
Printed in the US by Maple Press

In memory of George Herring

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Chapter 1

Shill Game

I

> A long time ago when I was writing for the pulps I put into a story a line like "He got out of the car and walked across the sun-drenched sidewalk until the shadow of the awning over the entrance fell across his face like the touch of cool water." They took it out when they published the story. Their readers didn't appreciate this sort of thing—just held up the action. I set out to prove them wrong. My theory was that the readers just *thought* they cared about nothing but the action; that really, although they didn't know it, the thing they cared about, and that I cared about, was the creation of emotion through dialogue and description.[1]

That the detective story represented something more to Raymond Chandler than a mere commercial product, furnished for popular entertainment purposes, can be judged from the fact that he came to it late in life, with a long and successful business career behind him. He published his first and best novel, *The Big Sleep*, in 1939, when he was fifty years old, and had studied the form for almost a decade. The short stories he had written over that period are for the most part sketches for the novels, episodes that he will later take over verbatim as chapters in the longer form: and he

[1] Raymond Chandler, Letter to Frederick Lewis Allen, May 7, 1948, in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, ed. D. Gardiner and K. S. Walker (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), p. 219.

developed his technique by imitating and reworking models produced by other detective story writers: a deliberate, self-conscious apprenticeship at a time of life when most writers have already found themselves.

Two aspects of his earlier experience seem to account for the personal tone of his books. As an executive of the oil industry, he lived in Los Angeles for some fifteen years before the depression put him out of business, enough time to sense what was unique about the city's atmosphere, and in a position to see what power was and what forms it took. And, though a born American, he spent his school years, from the age of eight, in England, and had an English public school education.

For Chandler thought of himself primarily as a stylist, and it was his distance from the American language that gave him the chance to use it as he did. In that respect his situation was not unlike that of Nabokov: the writer of an adopted language is already a kind of stylist by force of circumstance. Language can never again be unselfconscious for him; words can never again be unproblematical. The naive and unreflective attitude towards literary expression is henceforth proscribed, and he feels in his language a kind of material density and resistance: even those clichés and commonplaces which for the native speaker are not really words at all, but instant communication, take on outlandish resonance in his mouth, are used between quotation marks, as you would delicately expose some interesting specimen: his sentences are collages of heterogeneous materials, of odd linguistic scraps, figures of speech, colloquialisms, place names and local sayings, all laboriously pasted together in an illusion of continuous discourse. In this, the lived situation of the writer of a borrowed language is already emblematic of the situation of the modern writer in general, in that words have become objects for him. The detective story, as a form without ideological content, without any overt political or social or philosophical point, permits such pure stylistic experimentation.

But it offers other advantages as well, and it is no accident that the chief practitioners of art-for-art's sake in the late modern

novel, Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet, almost always organize their works around a murder: think of *Le Voyeur* and *La Maison de Rendezvous*; think of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. These writers and their artistic contemporaries represent a kind of second wave of the modernist and formalistic impulse which produced the great modernism of the first two decades of the twentieth century.[2] But in the earlier works, modernism was a reaction against narration, against plot: here the empty, decorative event of the murder serves as a way of organizing essentially plotless material into an illusion of movement, into the formally satisfying arabesques of a puzzle unfolding. Yet the real content of these books is an almost scenic one: the motels and college towns of the American landscape in *Lolita*, the island of *Le Voyeur*, the drab provincial cities of *Les Gommes* or of *Dans le labyrinthe*.

In much the same way, a case can be made for Chandler as a painter of American life: not as a builder of those large-scale models of the American experience which great literature offers, but rather in fragmentary pictures of setting and place, fragmentary perceptions which are by some formal paradox somehow inaccessible to serious literature.

Take for example some perfectly insignificant daily experience, such as the chance encounter of two people in the lobby of an apartment building. I find my neighbor unlocking his mailbox; I have never seen him before, we glance at each other briefly, his back is turned as he struggles with the larger magazines inside. Such an instant expresses in its fragmentary quality a profound truth about American life, in its perception of the stained carpets, the sand-filled spittoons, the poorly shutting glass doors, all testifying to the shabby anonymity of a meeting place between the luxurious

[2] These no longer fashionable references are to be explained by the fact that this text—let's call it stereoscopic rather than synoptic—is the synthesis of several perspectives on Chandler developed over the decades. Earlier versions appeared in: *The Southern Review* ("On Raymond Chandler", Vol. 6, 1970), *Littérature* ("L'éclatement du récit et la clôture californienne," Vol. 49, #1, 1983), and *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjek ("The Synoptic Chandler," Verso, 1993). A somewhat different version of this book has appeared in French, translated by Nicolas Vieillescazes (Les Prairies ordinaires, 2014).

private lives that stand side by side like closed monads behind the doors of the private apartments: a dreariness of waiting rooms and public bus stations, of the neglected places of collective living that fill up the interstices between the privileged compartments of middle-class living. Such a perception, it seems to me, is in its very structure dependent on chance and anonymity, on the vague glance in passing, as from the window of a bus, when the mind is intent on some more immediate preoccupation: its very essence is to be inessential. For this reason it eludes the registering apparatus of great literature: make of it some Joycean epiphany and the reader is obliged to take this moment as the center of his world, as something directly infused with symbolic meaning; and at once the most fragile and precious quality of the perception is irrevocably damaged, its slightness is lost, it can no longer be half-glimpsed, half-disregarded—the meaningless is arbitrarily given meaning.

Yet put such an experience in the framework of the detective story and everything changes. I learn that the man I saw does not even live in my building, that he was in reality opening the murdered woman's mailbox, not his own; and suddenly my attention flows back onto the neglected perception and sees it in renewed, heightened form without damaging its structure. Indeed, it is as if there are certain moments in life which are accessible only at the price of a certain lack of intellectual focus: like objects at the edge of my field of vision which disappear when I turn to stare at them head-on. Proust felt this keenly, his whole aesthetic presupposing some absolute antagonism between spontaneity and self-consciousness. For Proust we can only be sure we have lived, we have perceived, after the fact of the experience itself; for him the deliberate, willful project to meet experience face to face in the present is always doomed to failure. In a minor way the unique temporal structure of the best detective story is also a pretext, a more organizational framework, for such isolated perception.

It is in this light that the well-known distinction between the atmosphere of English and American detective stories is to be understood. Gertrude Stein, in her *Lectures in America*, sees the essential feature of English literature to be the tireless description

of "daily life," of lived routine and continuity, in which possessions are daily counted up and evaluated, in which the basic structure is one of cycle and repetition. American life, American content, on the other hand, is a formless one, always to be re-invented, an uncharted wilderness in which the very notion of experience itself is perpetually called into question and revised, in which time is an indeterminate succession from which a few decisive, explosive, irrevocable instants stand out in relief. Hence the murder in the placid English village or in the fog-bound London club is read as the sign of a scandalous interruption in a peaceful continuity; whereas the gangland violence of the American big city is felt as a secret destiny, a kind of nemesis lurking beneath the surface of hastily acquired fortunes, anarchic city growth and impermanent private lives. Yet in both, the moment of violence, apparently central, is nothing but a diversion: the real function of the murder in the quiet village is for order to be felt more strongly; while the principal effect of the violence in the American detective story is to allow it to be experienced backwards, in pure thought, without risks, as a contemplative spectacle which gives not so much the illusion of life as the illusion that life has already been lived, that we have already had contact with the archaic sources of that Experience of which Americans have always made a fetish.

II

> We looked at each other with the clear innocent eyes of a couple of used car salesmen. (HW, IX, 361)[3]

European literature is metaphysical or formalistic because it takes the nature of the society, of the nation, for granted and works out

[3] Page references in the text to Chandler's first four novels, collected in *The Raymond Chandler Omnibus* (New York: Modern Library, 1975), are abbreviated as follows: BS—*The Big Sleep* (1939); FML—*Farewell, My Lovely* (1942); HW—*The High Window* (1942); LL—*The Lady in the Lake* (1943); to which, for convenience, chapter numbers for the quotes are also added.

beyond it. American literature never seems to get beyond the definition of its starting point: any picture of America is bound to be wrapped up in a question and a presupposition about the nature of American reality. European literature can choose its subject matter and the width of its lens; American literature feels obliged to put everything in, knowing that exclusion is also part of the process of definition, and that it can be called to account as much for what it doesn't say as for what it does.

The last great period of American literature, which ran more or less from one world war to the other, explored and defined America in a geographical mode, as a sum of separate localisms, as an additive unity, at its outside limit an ideal sum. But since World War II, the organic differences from region to region have been increasingly obliterated by standardization, and the organic social unity of each region has been increasingly fragmented and abstracted by the new closed lives of the individual family units, by the breakdown of cities and the dehumanization of transportation and of the media which lead from one monad to another. Communication in this new society is upwards, through the abstract connecting link, and back down again. The isolated units are all haunted by the feeling that the center of things, of life, of control, is elsewhere, beyond immediate lived experiences. The principal images of interrelationship in this new society are mechanical juxtapositions: the identical prefabricated houses in the housing project, swarming over the hills; the four-lane highway full of cars bumper to bumper and observed from above, abstractly, by a traffic helicopter. If there is a crisis in American literature at present, it should be understood against the background of this ungrateful social material, in which only trick shots can produce the illusion of life.

Chandler lies somewhere between these two literary situations. His whole background, his way of thinking and of seeing things, derives from the period between the wars. But by an accident of place, his social content anticipates the realities of the fifties and sixties. For Los Angeles is already a kind of microcosm and forecast of the country as a whole: a new centerless city, in which

the various classes have lost touch with each other because each is isolated in its own geographical compartment. If the symbol of social coherence and comprehensibility was furnished by the nineteenth-century Parisian apartment house (dramatized in Zola's *Pot-Bouille*) with its shop on the ground floor, its wealthy inhabitants on the second and third, petty bourgeoisie further up, and workers' rooms on top along with the maids and servants, then Los Angeles is the opposite, a spreading out horizontally, a flowing apart of the elements of the social structure.

Since there is no longer any privileged experience in which the whole of the social structure can be grasped, a figure must be invented who can be superimposed on the society as a whole, whose routine and life-pattern serve somehow to tie its separate and isolated parts together. The equivalent is the picaresque novel, where a single character moves from one background to another, linking "picturesque" but not intrinsically related episodes together. In doing this the detective in a sense once again fulfills the demands of the function of knowledge rather than that of lived experience: through him we are able to see, to know, the society as a whole, but he does not really stand for any genuine experience of it. Of course the origin of the literary detective lies in the creation of the professional police, whose organization can be attributed not so much to a desire to prevent crime in general as to the will on the part of modern governments to know and thus to control the varying elements of their administrative areas. The great continental detectives (Lecoq, Maigret) are generally policemen, but in the Anglo-Saxon countries where governmental control sits far more lightly on the citizens, the private detective, from Holmes to Chandler's Philip Marlowe, took the place of the government functionary, until the postwar return of the police procedural.

As an involuntary explorer of the society, Marlowe visits either those places you don't look at or those you can't: the anonymous or the wealthy and secretive. Both have something of the strangeness with which Chandler characterizes the police station: "A New York police reporter wrote once that when you pass in beyond

the green lights of the precinct station you pass clear out of this world into a place beyond the law" (LL, XXIII, 418). On the one hand those parts of the American scene which are as impersonal and seedy as public waiting rooms: run-down office buildings, the elevator with the spittoon and the elevator man sitting on a stool beside it; dingy office interiors, Marlowe's own in particular, seen at all hours of the clock, at those times when we have forgotten that offices exist, in the late evening, when the other offices are dark, in the early morning before the traffic begins; police stations; hotel rooms and lobbies, with the then characteristic potted palms and overstuffed armchairs; rooming houses with managers who work illegal lines of business on the side. All these places are characterized by belonging to the mass, collective side of our society: places occupied by faceless people, who leave no stamp of their personality behind them, in short, the dimension of the interchangeable, the inauthentic:

> Out of the apartment houses come women who should be young but have faces like stale beer; men with pulled-down hats and quick eyes that look the street over behind the cupped hand that shields the match flame; worn intellectuals with cigarette coughs and no money in the bank; fly cops with granite faces and unwavering eyes; cokies and coke peddlers; people who look like nothing in particular and know it, and once in a while even men that actually go to work. But they come out early, when the wide cracked sidewalks are empty and still have dew on them. (HW, VIII, 358)

The presentation of this kind of social material is far more frequent in European art than in our own: as if somehow we were willing to know anything about ourselves, the worst kind of secret, just as long as it was not this nameless, faceless anonymity. But it suffices to compare the faces of actors and participants in almost any European movie with those in American ones to note the absence in ours of the whole-grain lens and the dissimilarity between the visual representation and the features of people around us in the street. What makes this somewhat more difficult to observe is that of course our view of life is conditioned by the art we know, which

has trained us not to see what the texture of ordinary people's faces is, but rather to invest them with photographic glamour.

The other side of American life with which Marlowe comes into contact is the reverse of the above: the great estate, with its retinue of servants, chauffeurs, and secretaries; and around it, the various institutions which cater to wealth and preserve its secrecy: the private clubs, set back on private roads in the mountains, patrolled by a private police which admits members only; the clinics in which drugs are available; the private religious cults; the luxury hotels with their security personnel; the private gambling ships, anchored out beyond the three-mile limit; and a little further away, the corrupt local police who rule a municipality in the name of a single man or family, and protect the various kinds of illegal activity which spring up to satisfy money and its wants.

But Chandler's picture of America has an intellectual content as well: it is the converse, the darker concrete reality, of an abstract intellectual illusion about the United States. The federal system and the archaic federal Constitution developed in Americans a double image of their country's political reality, a dual system of political thoughts which never intersect with each other. On the one hand, a glamorous national politics whose distant leading figures are invested with charisma, an unreal, distinguished quality adhering to their foreign policy activities, their economic programs given the appearance of substance by the appropriate ideologies of liberalism or conservatism. On the other hand, local politics, with its odium, its ever-present corruption, its deals and perpetual preoccupation with undramatic, materialistic questions such as sewage disposal, zoning regulations, property taxes, and so forth. Governors are halfway between the two worlds, but for a mayor, for example, to become a senator involves a thoroughgoing metamorphosis, a transformation from one species into another. Indeed, the qualities perceived in the political macrocosm are only illusory, the projection of the dialectical opposite of the real qualities of the microcosm: everyone is convinced of the dirtiness of politics and politicians on the local level, and when everything is seen in terms of interest, the absence of greed

becomes the feature which dazzles. Like the father whose defects are invisible to his own children, the national politicians (with occasional stunning exceptions) seem to be beyond personal self-interest, and this lends an automatic prestige to their professional affairs, lifts them onto a different rhetorical level entirely.

On the level of abstract thought, the effect of the preordained permanency of the Constitution is to hinder the development of any speculative political theorizing and replace it with pragmatism within the system, the calculation of counter-influences and possibilities of compromise. A kind of reverence attaches to the abstract, a disabused cynicism to the concrete. As in certain types of mental obsession and dissociation, Americans are able to observe local injustice, racism, corruption, educational incompetence with a practiced eye, while they continue to entertain boundless optimism as to the greatness of the country, taken as a whole.

The action of Chandler's books takes place inside the microcosm, in the darkness of a local world without the benefit of the federal Constitution, as in a world without God. The literary shock is dependent on the habit of the political double standard in the mind of the reader: it is only because we are used to thinking of the nation as a whole in terms of justice that we are struck by these images of people caught in the power of a local county authority as absolutely as though they were in a foreign country. The local power apparatus is beyond appeal, in this other face of federalism; the rule of naked force and money is complete and undisguised by any embellishments of theory. In an eerie optical illusion, the jungle reappears in the suburbs.

In this sense the honesty of the detective can be understood as an organ of perception, a membrane which, irritated, serves to indicate in its sensitivity the nature of the world around it. For if the detective is dishonest, his job boils down to the technical problem of how to succeed on a given paid assignment. If he is honest, he is able to feel the resistance of things, to permit an intellectual vision of what he goes through on the level of action. And Chandler's sentimentalism, which attaches to occasional honest characters in the earlier books, but which is perhaps strongest in *The Long*

Goodbye, is the reverse and complement of this vision, a momentary relief from it, a compensation for its hopeless bleakness.

The detective's journey is episodic because of the fragmentary, atomistic nature of the society he moves through. In European countries, people no matter how solitary are still somehow engaged in the social substance; their very solitude is social; their identity is inextricably entangled with that of all the others by a clear system of classes, by a national language, in what Heidegger describes as the *Mitsein*, the being-together-with-others.

But the form of Chandler's books reflects an initial American separation of people from each other, their need to be linked by some external force (in this case the detective) if they are ever to be fitted together as parts of the same picture puzzle. And this separation is projected out onto space itself: no matter how crowded the street in question, the various solitudes never really merge into a collective experience, there is always distance between them. Each dingy office is separated from the next; each room in the rooming house from the one next to it; each dwelling from the pavement beyond it. This is why the most characteristic leitmotif of Chandler's books is the figure standing, looking out of one world, peering vaguely or attentively across into another:

> Across the street was an Italian funeral home, neat and quiet and reticent, white painted brick, flush with the side-walk. Pietro Palermo Funeral Parlors. The thin green script of neon sign lay across its facade, with a chaste air. A tall man in dark clothes came out of the front door and leaned against the white wall. He looked very handsome. He had dark skin and a handsome head of iron-grey hair brushed back from his forehead. He got out what looked at that distance to be a silver or platinum and black enamel cigarette case, opened it languidly with two long brown fingers and selected a gold-tipped cigarette. He put the case away and lit the cigarette with a pocket lighter that seemed to match the case. He put that away and folded his arms and stared at nothing with half-closed eyes. From the tip of his motionless cigarette a thin wisp of smoke rose straight up past his face, as thin and straight as the smoke of a dying campfire at dawn. (HW, VIII, 358)

In psychological or allegorical terms, this figure on the doorstep represents Suspicion, and suspicion is everywhere in this world, peering from behind a curtain, barring entry, refusing to answer, preserving the privacy of the monad against snoopers and trespassers. Its characteristic manifestations are the servant coming back out into the hallway, the man in the car lot hearing a noise, the custodian of a deserted farm looking outside, the manager of the rooming house taking another look upstairs, the bodyguard appearing in the doorway.

Hence the detective's principal contact with the people he meets is a rather external one; they are seen briefly in their own doorways, for a purpose, and their personalities come out against the grain, hesitant, hostile, stubborn, as they react to the various questions and drag their feet on the answers. But seen another way the very superficiality of these meetings with the characters is artistically motivated: for the characters themselves are pretexts for their speech, and the specialized nature of this speech is that it is somehow external, indicative of types, formulaic remarks bounced across to strangers:

> Her eyes receded and her chin followed them. She sniffed hard. "You been drinkin' liquor," she said coldly.
>
> "I just had a tooth out. The dentist gave it to me."
>
> "I don't hold to it."
>
> "It's bad stuff except for medicine," I said.
>
> "I don't hold with it for medicine neither."
>
> "I think you're right," I said. "Did he leave her any money? Her husband?"
>
> "I wouldn't know." Her mouth was the size of a prune and as smooth. I had lost out. (HW, XVI, 206–97)

This kind of dialogue is also characteristic of the early Faulkner; it is quite different from that of Hemingway, which is much more personal and fluid, created from the inside, somehow re-enacted and personally re-experienced by the author. Here clichés and stereotyped speech patterns are heated into life by the presence

behind them of a certain form of protective emotion you would feel in your dealings with strangers: a kind of outgoing belligerence, or hostility, or the amusement of the native, or bantering, helpful indifference: a communicativeness always nuanced or colored by an attitude. And whenever Chandler's dialogue, which in the early books is very good, strays from this particular level to something more intimate and more expressive, it begins to falter; for his forte is the speech pattern of inauthenticity, of externality, and derives immediately from the inner organic logic of his material itself.

In the art of the twenties and thirties, however, such dialogue had the value of social schematism. A set of fixed social types and categories underlay it, and the dialogue was itself a way of demonstrating the coherence and peculiar organization the society possessed, of apprehending it in miniature. Anyone who has watched New York movies of the thirties is aware of how linguistic characterization feeds into a picture of the city as a whole: the stock ethnic and professional types, the cabbie, the reporter, the flatfoot, the high society playboy, the flapper, and so forth. Needless to say, the decay of this kind of movie results from the disintegration of such a picture of the city, such an organization of reality. But already the Los Angeles of Chandler was an unstructured city, and the social types are here nowhere near as pronounced. By the chance of a historical accident, Chandler was able to benefit from the survival of a purely linguistic, typological way of creating his characters after the system of types that had supported it was already disappearing. A last hold, before the dissolving contours of the society made these linguistic markers disappear also, leaving the novelist faced with the problem of the absence of any standard by which dialogue can be judged realistic or lifelike.

In Chandler the presentation of social reality is thus immediately and directly problematized by language itself. There can be no doubt that he invented a distinctive style, with its own humor and imagery, its own special movement. But the most striking feature of that language its use of slang, and here Chandler's own remarks are instructive:

> I had to learn American just like a foreign language. To use it I had to study it and analyze it. As a result, when I use slang, colloquialisms, snide talk or any kind of off-beat language I do it deliberately. The literary use of slang is a study in itself. I've found that there are only two kinds that are any good: slang that has established itself in the language, and slang that you make up yourself. Everything else is apt to be passé before it gets into print...[4]

And Chandler comments on O'Neill's use in *The Iceman Cometh* of the expression "the big sleep," "in the belief that it was an accepted underworld expression. If so, I'd like to see whence it comes, because I invented the expression."

But slang is eminently serial and impersonal in its nature: it exists as objectively as a joke, passed from hand to hand, always elsewhere, never fully the property of its user. In this, the literary problem of slang forms a parallel in the microcosm of style to the problem of the presentation of the serial society itself, never present fully in any of its manifestations, without a privileged center, offering the impossible alternative between an objective and abstract lexical knowledge of it as a whole and a lived concrete experience of its worthless components.

III

Part of the appeal of Chandler's books for us is a nostalgic one. They are among a whole class of objects we once called "camp," including: Humphrey Bogart movies, certain comic books, hard-boiled detective stories, and monster movies, among other things. Pop art was the principal contemporary manifestation of this nostalgic interest: it is not unlike art about other art, for in spite of its simplicity it has two levels within it, a simplified outer expression, and an inner period atmosphere which is its object and which is evoked by balloon speeches, the enlarged dots of newspaper print, the faded faces of celebrities and well-known imaginary characters.

---

[4] Letter to Alex Barris, March 18, 1949, in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, p. 80.

Rather than art about art, it would be more accurate to say that it is art whose content is not direct experience, but already formed cultural and ideological artifacts.

Yet the experience of nostalgia remains itself to be explained. It is not a constant of all periods, and yet when it does appear, it is generally characterized by an attachment to a moment of the past wholly different from our own, which offers a more complete kind of relief from the present. The Romantics for example reacted against the growth of an industrial society by recalling examples of pastoral, hierarchically organized ones from history or from travel. And limited sections of our own society continue to feel this kind of nostalgia, for Jeffersonian America, for example, or for the conditions of the frontier. Or else they satisfy their nostalgia in a concrete way by tourism in countries whose life and ways are the equivalent of some pre-capitalistic stage of historical development.

But the nostalgia which gave birth to pop art fastens for its object on the period immediately preceding our own, one apparently from a larger historical perspective not very different from it: its objects all come from a span of years too often referred to simply as the thirties and which in reality extends from the New Deal well across the parenthesis of World War II, and up to the beginning of the Cold War. This period is marked by strong political and ideological movements, and with the revival of political life in the sixties these too have been the object of admiration and nostalgia. But they were themselves results and not causes, and are far from being its most significant features.

The atmosphere of a given period is crystallized first of all in its objects: the double-breasted suits, the long dresses of the new look, the fluffy hair-dos, and the styling of the automobiles. But our nostalgia for this particular time is distinct from the evocation of museum-piece objects from the past in that it seeks out not so much the life-style behind them as the objects themselves. It aims at a world like our own in its general conditions, industrialism, market capitalism, mass production, and unlike it only in being somewhat simpler. It is partly a fascination with dating,

aging, the passage of time for its own sake: like looking at photographs of ourselves in old-fashioned clothing in order to have a direct intuition of change, of historicity. (And undoubtedly the existence of the movies as a form does much to account for the peculiar intensity of this nostalgia: we can not only see the past alive before us tangibly, without having to rely on our own imagination of it; more than that, we can feel this past personally by seeing young actors whom we ourselves have grown familiar with as older figures, even by seeing movies we dimly remember from our own pasts.) But this historicity is itself a historical thing. It is as far from the ritual cycle of the seasons as is the turnover in clothing fashions. It is a rapid change intimately linked with the production and marketing of objects for sale.

For the beginning of the Cold War also marked the beginning of the great post-war boom, and with it, the prodigious expansion in advertising, the use of television as a more vivid and suggestive way of selling competing and similar products—one that mingles them more intimately with our lives than did the newspaper or the radio.

The older products had a certain stability about them, a certain permanence of identity that can still be captured here and there in farm country, for example, where a few sparse signs point to the attachment to a few indispensable products. Here, the brand-name is still synonymous with the object itself: a car is a "Ford," a lighter is a "Ronson," a hat is a "Stetson." In this early stage of the marketing of industrial products, the brands require a stable, relatively unchanging identity in order to become identified and adopted by the public, and the relatively primary and simplified advertising is merely a way of recalling something already familiar to the public mind. To be sure, the advertisements tend to blend with the image of the brand itself, but for that very reason in this period the advertisements also change very little and have a kind of stability of their own. Thus the older kinds of products remain relatively integrated into the landscape of natural objects; they still fulfill easily identifiable needs, desires which are still felt to be relatively "natural"; lying midway between nature (land,

climate, foodstuffs) and human reality, they correspond to a world in which the principal activity is still the overcoming of the resistance of nature and of things, and in which human need and desire arise as a function of that struggle.

But with the post-war boom the premium comes to be placed on rapid change and the evolution of products rather than on their stability and identity. In automobiles, in cigarettes, in soaps, among many other things, this wild proliferation and transformation of marketable objects can be observed. Nor can scientific or technical advance (the invention of cigarette filters, of the automatic transmission, of the long-playing record) be held responsible for it. On the contrary most of these technical innovations were feasible earlier; it is only when frequent styling changes are desirable that they are appealed to. The cause of this wholesale alteration in our purchasable environment would appear to be twofold: first, the increasing wealth and diversification of the various manufacturing companies which no longer have to depend on a single brand and which can now invent and eliminate brands at their convenience. Second, the increasing autonomy of advertising, which is able to float any number of unfamiliar new objects in a hurry—in a kind of time exposure in which the older, slower familiarity is artificially reproduced by around-the-clock stimuli.

What is being created in these advertising exposures is not so much an object, a new type of physical thing, but rather an artificial need or desire, a kind of mental or ideological symbol by which the consumer's craving to buy is associated with a particular type of packaging and label. Evidently in a situation in which most basic needs have already been satisfied it is necessary to evolve ever newer and more specialized ones in order to continue to be able to sell products. But the change has its psychological dimension as well, and corresponds to the turnover from a production economy to a service one. Fewer and fewer people are involved with objects as tools, with natural objects as raw materials; more and more are involved with things as semi-ideas, busy marketing and consuming objects which they never really apprehend as pure materiality, as the product of work on resisting things. In such a world, material

needs are sublimated into more symbolic satisfactions; the initial desire is not the solution of a material problem, but the style and symbolic connotations of the product to be possessed.

The life-problems of such a world are radically different in kind from those of the relatively simple world of needs and physical resistance which preceded it. They involve a struggle, not against things and relatively solid systems of power, but against ideological fantasms, bits and pieces of spiritualized matter, the solicitations of various kinds of dream-like mirages and cravings, a life to the second power, not heightened and intensified but merely refined and confused, unable to find a footing in the reality of things.

Such a world clearly poses the most difficult problems for the artist trying to register it. It is full of merely spiritualized, or in our conventional terminology, merely "psychological" problems which do not seem to stand in any direct, observable relationship to the objective realities of the society. At their upper limit, presented for themselves alone, these problems lose themselves in super-subtleties and uninteresting introspection; while the presentation of the objective reality itself strikes the modern reader as old-fashioned and without any relevance to his lived experience.

But the most immediate and visible effects of this situation are stylistic. In the time of Balzac manufactured objects, products, have an immediate and intrinsic novelistic interest, and not only because they record as furnishings the taste and personality of their owners. In this earliest period of industrial capitalism, they are in the very process of being invented and marketed by contemporaries, and where some books tell the very story of their evolution and exploitation, others allow them to stand mute around or behind the characters themselves, as testimony to the nature of the world being created at that moment, and to the stage which human energies have been able to reach. In the era of stable products, however, to which Chandler's books belong, there is no longer any feeling of the creative energy embodied in a product: the latter are simply there, in a permanent industrial background

which has come to resemble that of nature itself. Now the author's task is to make an inventory of these objects, to demonstrate, by the fullness of his catalogue, how completely he knows his way around the world of machines and machine products, and it is in this sense that Chandler's descriptions of furniture, his description of women's clothing styles, will function: as a naming, a sign of expertise and know-how. And at the limits of this type of language, the brand-names themselves: "I went in past him, into a dim pleasant room with an apricot Chinese rug that looked expensive, deep-sided chairs, a number of white drum lamps, a big Capehart in the corner" (LL, III, 481). "I got a half-bottle of Old Taylor out of the deep drawer of the desk" (HW, XII, 372). "The sweetish smell of his Fatima poisoned the air for me" (HW, XXXV, 462). (Hemingway is of course the chief representative of this style of brand-name-dropping, but it has currency throughout the literature of the thirties.)

By the time we come to that cross-country inventory of Americana which is Nabokov's *Lolita*, the attitude to objects has changed significantly. Precisely in order for his descriptions to be representative, Nabokov hesitates to use the actual brand-names of the products: the aesthetic reason, that such language is of a different nature from the language of the narration generally and cannot be crudely introduced into it, is part of a more general realization that the physical product itself has long since been dissolved as a permanence. Like the "substances" of philosophy, of mathematics, of the physical sciences, it has long since lost its essentiality and become a locus of processes, a meeting place for social manipulation and human raw material. Where Nabokov occasionally does use names, they are brand-names invented in imitation of the real, and as such his use is a way of rendering, not the product, but the process of nomination. But in general he describes the jumble of commercial products in the American landscape from the outside, as pure appearance without any reference to functionality, since in the new American culture of the fifties, functionality, any practical use in the satisfaction of need and desire, is no longer of great importance or interest.

The famous pop art Brillo box represents yet another and different kind of attitude towards objects: the attempt to seize them, not in their material, but in their dated historical reality, as a certain moment and style of the past. It is a fetish representing the will to return to a period when there was still a certain distance between objects, when the manufactured landscape still had a certain solidity. The Brillo box is a way of making us stare at a single commercial product, in hopes that our vision of all those around us will be transformed, that our new stare will infuse those also with depth and solidity, with the meaning of remembered objects and products, with the physical foundation and dimensions of the older world of need.

The comic strip drawing does much the same thing for the world of culture, as jammed as the airwaves with bits and pieces of stories, imagined characters, cheaply manufactured fantasies of all kinds, even where newspaper and historical truth have come to be assimilated to the products of the entertainment industry. Now suddenly all the floating figures and shapes are simplified down, stamped with exaggeration, blown up and reduced to the size of children's daydreams. The transfer to the fixed object which is the painting takes place in imitation of the material consumption by the child of the comic books themselves, which he handles and uses as objects. For the nostalgia for this earlier world operates just as strongly on the forms as on the content of its materials. Humphrey Bogart, for example, obviously stands for the hero who knows how to find his way around the dangerous anarchy of the world of the thirties and forties. He is distinguished from the other stars of his period in that he is able to show fear, and his fear is the organ of perception and exploration of the dark world lying about him. As an image, he is related to Marlowe (indeed, briefly coincides with him in the movie version of *The Big Sleep*), and a descendant of the Hemingway hero of the earlier part of the same period, in whom the trait of purely technical know-how was even more pronounced.

On the other hand his revival has its formal dimension as well, whether we are consciously aware of it or not. For in our

recognition of Humphrey Bogart as a culture hero is also included a regret for the smaller black-and-white ninety-minute movie in which he traditionally appeared, and beyond that, for that period in the history of the medium when work was done in a small, fixed form, in a series of small works rather than in isolated, enormous, and expensive productions. (This evolution in the movie industry parallels the movement in serious literature away from the fixed form of the nineteenth century towards the personally invented, style-conscious individual forms of the twentieth.)

Thus the perception of the products with which the world around us is furnished precedes our perception of things-in-themselves and forms it. We first use objects, only then gradually do we learn to stand away from them and to contemplate them disinterestedly, and it is in this way that the commercial nature of our surroundings influences and shapes the production of our literary images, stamping them with the character of a certain period. In Chandler's style the period identifies itself in his most characteristic feature, the exaggerated comparison, the function of which is at the same time to isolate the object in question and to indicate its value: "She was in oyster-white lounging pajamas trimmed with white fur, cut as flowingly as a summer sea frothing on the beach of some small and exclusive island" (BS, XXXII, 134). "Even on Central Avenue, not the quietest-dressed street in the world, he looked about as conspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food" (FML, I, 143). "There was a desk and a night clerk with one of those moustaches that gets stuck under your fingernail" (LL, XXXV, 604). "This is the ultimate end of the fog belt, and the beginning of that semi-desert region where the sun is as light and dry as old sherry in the morning, as hot as a blast furnace at noon, and drops like an angry brick at nightfall" (LL, XXXVI, 609).

As in the hard-boiled movies, the narrator's voice works in counterpoint to the things seen, heightening them subjectively through his own reactions to them, through the poetry his comparisons lend them, and letting them fall back again into their sordid, drab reality through the deadpan humor which disavows what it has

just maintained. But where the movies already present a divided structure of vision and sound ready to be played off against each other, the literary work must rely on some deeper division in its material itself. Such a tone is possible for it only against the background of a certain recognizable uniformity of objects, among which the outlandish comparison serves as a pause, drawing a circle momentarily around one of them, causing it to stand out as typical of one of the two zones of the novel's content, as either very expensive or very shabby. It avoids the flat and naturalistically prosaic on the one hand, and the poetic and unreal on the other, in a delicate compromise executed by the tone of the narration. And because it is a spoken account in its very essence, it stands as testimony, like the records of old songs or old comedians, to what everyday life was like in a world similar enough to our own to seem very distant.

IV

> My theory was that the readers just *thought* they cared about nothing but the action; that really, although they didn't know it, the thing they cared about, and that I cared about, was the creation of emotion through dialogue and description. The things they remembered, that haunted them, was not, for example, that a man got killed, but that in the moment of his death he was trying to pick a paper clip up off the polished surface of a desk and it kept slipping away from him, so that there was a look of strain on his face and his mouth was half open in a kind of tormented grin, and the last thing in the world he thought about was death. He didn't even hear the death knock on the door. That damn little paper clip kept slipping away from his fingers.[5]

Raymond Chandler's novels have not one form, but two, an objective form and a subjective one, the rigid external structure of the detective story on the one hand, and a more personal distinctive rhythm of events on the other, arranged, as is the case with any

[5] Letter to Frederick Lewis Allen, May 7, 1948, ibid., 219.

novelist of originality, according to some ideal molecular chain in the brain cells, as personal in their encephalographic pattern as a fingerprint, peopled with recurrent phantoms, obsessive character types, actors in some forgotten psychic drama through which the social world continues to be interpreted. Yet the two kinds of form do not conflict with each other; on the contrary the second seems to have been generated out of the first by the latter's own internal contradictions. Indeed, it results from a kind of formula on Chandler's part:

> It often seems to this particular writer that the only reasonably honest and effective way of fooling the reader that remains is to make the reader exercise his mind about the wrong problem, to make him, as it were, solve a mystery (since he is almost sure to solve something) which will land him in a bypath because it is only tangential to the central problem.[6]

For the detective story is not only a purely intellectual mode of knowing events, it is also a puzzle in which the faculties of analysis and reasoning are to be exercised, and Chandler here simply generalizes a technique of outwitting the reader. Instead of the innovation that will only work once (the most famous is of course that of Agatha Christie in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, where as is well known the murderer turns out to be the narrator himself), he here invents a principle for the construction of plot as such.

It is of course the presence of this kind of plot construction in all of his books, the persistence of this fixed intellectual purpose, that accounts for their similarity as forms. Yet the two aspects of the works hardly seem commensurable, seem to involve different dimensions that miss each other in passing: the intellectual purpose is a purely temporal one, it abolishes itself when it is successful, and when the reader realizes that he has been misled and that the real solution to the murder is to be found elsewhere. The form is on the other hand more spatial in character: even after the temporal reading of the book is finished we have a feeling of its

[6] "Casual Notes on the Mystery Novel" (1949), in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, p. 69.

continuity spread out before us in a pattern, and the earlier, misleading twists of the plot (which the pure mind rejects as illusory filling just as soon as it guesses the secret to the puzzle) remain for the imagination of form as an integral part of the road traveled, the experiences gone through. In Chandler's books we are therefore confronted with the paradox of something slight in density and resonance being at the source of some incomparably larger solid, of a kind of nothingness creating being, of a shadow projecting three-dimensionality out from itself. It is as though an object designed for some purely practical purpose, a machine of some kind, suddenly turned out to be of interest on a different level of perception, on the aesthetic for example; for the rather negative technical device, the quantitative formula for purely intellectual deception given above in Chandler's own words, is responsible in a kind of dialectical accident for the positive qualitative nature of his forms, their lopsided, episodic movements, the characteristic effects and emotions related to them.

The initial deception takes place on the level of the book as a whole, in that it passes itself off as a murder mystery. In fact Chandler's stories are first and foremost descriptions of searches, in which murder is involved, and which sometimes end with the murder of the person sought for. The immediate result of this formal change is that the detective no longer inhabits the atmosphere of pure thought, of puzzle-solving and the resolution of a set of given elements. On the contrary, he is propelled outwards into the space of his world and obliged to move from one kind of social reality to another incessantly, trying to find clues to his client's whereabouts.

Once set in motion, the search has unexpectedly violent results. It is as if the world of the beginning of the book, the imaginary Chandler Southern California, lay in a kind of uneasy balance, an equilibrium of large and small systems of corruption, in a tense silence as of people straining to listen. The appearance of the detective breaks the balance, sets the various mechanisms of suspicion ringing, as he crosses the boundary lines snooping and preparing to make trouble in a way that isn't yet clear. The upshot is a whole

series of murders and beatings: it is as though they existed already in a latent state, the acts that had merited them having already been committed, like chemical substances juxtaposed, waiting for a single element to be withdrawn or added in order to complete a reaction which nothing can stop. The appearance of the detective is this element, allowing the predetermining causes to run their course suddenly, to burst into flame on exposure to the open air.

But as has already been made apparent in Chandler's description of his own plot construction, this trail of bloodshed is a false scent, designed to draw the reader's attention to guilt in the wrong places. The diversion is not dishonest, inasmuch as the guilt uncovered along the way is also real enough; the latter is simply not that with which the book is directly involved. Hence the episodic nature of the diversionary plot: the characters are drawn in heightened, sharp fashion because we will never see them again. Their entire essence must be revealed in a single brief meeting. Yet these meetings take place on a different plane of reality from that of the main plot of the book. It is not only that the intellectual function of our mind is busy weighing and selecting them (are they related in some way to the search or are they not?) in a set of operations which it does not have to perform on the materials of the main plot (the client and his or her household, the person sought and his or her connections). The very violence and crimes themselves are here apprehended in a different mode: since they are tangential and secondary for us, we learn of them in a manner not so much realistic (novelistic) as legendary, much as we would hear about occasional violence in the newspaper or over the radio. Our interest in them is purely anecdotal, and already constitutes a kind of distance from them. Whether we know it yet or not therefore, these characters of the secondary plot exist for us in a different dimension, like glimpses through a window, noises from the back of a store, unfinished stories, unrelated activities going on in the society around us simultaneously with our own.

The climax of the book must therefore involve a return to its beginning, to the initial plot and characters. Obviously the person searched for must be found. But in a perhaps less obvious way,

the guilty party (since a murder, a crime, is always in some way involved in the search) must turn out to be in one way or another a member of the family, the client or a member of his entourage. Chandler's novels are all variations on this pattern, almost mathematically predictable combinations and permutations of these basic possibilities: the missing person is dead and the client did it, or the missing person is guilty and the body found was that of somebody else, or both the client and a member of her entourage are guilty and the missing person is not really missing at all, and so forth.

In a sense this pattern is in itself little more than a variation on the law of the least likely party, since it seems to make little sense that a criminal would go to a detective in the first place and ask him to solve a murder of which he or she was in reality guilty. And then there is a secondary, sociological shock: the comparison between all the secondary, relatively institutionalized killings (gangland murders, police brutality) and the private-life, domestic crime which is the book's central event and which turns out to be just as sordid and violent in its own way.

But the principal explanation of this pattern of a return to the beginning is to be found in the ritual unveiling of the murderer itself. A kind of intellectual satisfaction might be derived from a demonstration of the necessity for such-and-such a minor character, met only briefly in passing, to be the murderer, but we have already seen that the emotional effect of the revelation of the murderer depends on a certain familiarity with its innocent mask; and the only characters in Chandler whom we stay with long enough to develop this familiarity, whom we ever get to know in any kind of depth of character analysis, are those of the opening, of what has been called the main plot.

(In ingenious and metaphysical detective stories such as Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommes* or Doderer's *Ein Mord den Jeder begeht*, the logic inherent in this situation is pushed to its conclusion and the murderer turns out to be the detective himself, in that abstract equation of I = I which Hegel saw as the source of all self-conscious identity. In a more Freudian way, Chandler's imitators

such as Ross Macdonald have experimented with situations in which, after a search through time as well as through space, the criminal and the victim or the client and the criminal turn out to be related to each other, in an Oedipal variation on the various generations. Yet in all this the detective story plot merely follows the basic tendency of all literary plots or intrigue in general, which is marked by the resolution of multiplicity back into some primal unity, by a return to some primal starting point, in the marriage of hero and heroine and the recreation of the original family cellular unit, or the unveiling of the hero's mysterious origins, and so forth.)

On the other hand, it would be wrong to think of Chandler's stories as conforming in their final effect with the description we have given of the unveiling of the murderer in the classical detective story. For the discovery of the criminal here is only half of a more complicated revelation, and takes place, not only as the climax of a murder mystery, but also as that of a search. The search and the murder serve as alternating centers for our attention in a kind of intricate Gestalt pattern; each serves to mask off the weaker, less convincing aspects of the other, each serves to arrest the blurring of the other out into the magical and the symbolic and to refocus it in a raw and sordid clarity. When our mind is following the motif of the murder, the search ceases to be a mere literary technique, a pretext on which to hang a series of episodes, and is invested with a kind of depressing fatality, like a circular movement narrowing down. When on the contrary we focus on the search as the organizing center of the events described, the murder becomes a purposeless accident, the senseless breaking off of a thread, of a trail.

Indeed, it would not be too much to say that there takes place in Chandler a de-mystification of violent death. The fact of the search tends to arrest the transformation involved in the revelation of the murderer. There is no longer behind the unveiling that infinity of possibilities of evil, that formlessness behind a determinate mask. One character has simply been transformed into another; a name, a label, has wavered and then gone to fix itself to

someone else. For the attribute of being a murderer can no longer function as a symbol of pure evil when murder itself has lost its symbolic qualities.

Chandler's de-mystification involves the removal of purpose from the murder-event, unlike the classical detective story, which always invests murder with purpose by its very formal perspective. The murder there is, as we have seen, a kind of abstract point which is made to bear meaning and significance by the convergence of all lines upon it. In the world of the classical detective story nothing happens which is not related to the central murder: therefore it is purposeful, if for no other reason than to organize all that raw material around itself. (The actual purpose, the motive and cause, is worked up after the fact by the author, and never matters very much.)

But in Chandler the other random violence of the secondary plot has intervened to contaminate the central murder. And by the time we reach its explanation, we have come to feel all violence in the same light, and it strikes us as being just as shoddy and cheap, just as physically abrupt and as morally insignificant.

Murder comes to seem moreover in its very essence accidental and without meaning. It was the optic of the classical detective story, the distortion of its formal perspective, that made the murder take on the appearance of Necessity, and look like the almost disembodied result of a process of purely mental planning and premeditation, like the jotting down on paper of the results of mathematical operations performed in the head. Now, however, the gap between intention and execution is glaringly evident: no matter what planning is involved, the leap to physical action, the committing of the murder itself, is always abrupt and without prior logical justification in the world of reality. Thus the reader's mind has been used as an element in a very complicated aesthetic deception: he has been made to expect the solution to an intellectual puzzle, his purely intellectual functions are operating emptily, in anticipation of it, and suddenly, in its place, he is given an evocation of death in all its physicality, when there is no longer any time to prepare himself for it properly, when he is obliged to

take the strong sensation on its own terms. Was it then simply, as Chandler himself suggests in our epigraph, to substitute an experience of space for that of the temporality of problem solving, that these shill games were constructed?

Chapter 2

Mapping Space

The tension in Chandler criticism will reproduce the henceforth inevitable one between semiotic analysis and interpretation as such, between the formal exploration of a space that returns again and again and can be apprehended only by way of its identity with itself and a theme or a meaning ("down these mean streets," etc., Chandler's own romantic ideology, the concept of honor, the very *mise en abyme* of the stained glass window that welcomes Marlowe to the Sternwood mansion).

But "space" must be read; unless conventional modes of reading are presupposed (conventions being themselves everywhere in crisis in this society), the reader may expect to pass through an initial period of programmation, through some inaugural entry chamber in which the appropriate decoding techniques are taught and learned. Even as far as the category of space itself is concerned, it cannot be assumed to preexist the text either, but must be projected by the latter as that "code" of space which the reader must learn to read. We might therefore have begun by noting receptacle space in *The Big Sleep*, halls and interiors too capacious for their furnishings ("large hard chairs with rounded red plush seats were backed into the vacant spaces of the wall round about. They didn't look as if anybody had ever sat in them" [BS, I, 3–4]): this is a kind of phenomenological training in which we learn to sense

distance, separation, disjunction, between a container and its contents. It prepares us then for a sensitivity to furnishings as such, to "interior decoration" of a type that can fill up the vacant rooms or buildings of a certain Southern California; but it also problematizes the relationship between the latter and nature itself ("Then more trees and beyond everything the solid, uneven, comfortable line of the foothills.")

Yet this opening chapter of *The Big Sleep* contains other interesting clues. The stained glass window was rather obvious (although its hidden meaning lies, one would think, in the *absence* of the villain, something of the secret of the novelty of Chandler's plots); the portrait may be a little less so:

> a stiffly posed job of an officer in full regimentals of about the time of the Mexican war. The officer had a neat black imperial, black mustachios, hot hard coal-black eyes, and the general look of a man it would pay to get along with. I thought this might be General Sternwood's grandfather. (BS, I, 4)

At once, spatial and temporal coordinates are set in place which are altogether unusual in Chandler's work and may thus be taken in some sense to be inaugural, to establish the frame within which all the rest will take place. These coordinates involve imperialism itself and spatially designate that Third-World other from whom Southern California has been wrested: it is striking to note that "Mexico" as an alternate space will not reappear until *The Long Goodbye*. Otherwise, its functional role is taken, significantly, by closer elements:

> "Where would you make for if you lost your hideout in this town?"
> "Mexico," I laughed. (FML, XXXIII, 281)

Marlowe laughs at the corrupt policeman's suggestion because in fact Moose Malloy is in hiding much closer to Los Angeles, on one of the gambling boats standing out beyond the three-mile limit. Spatially, then, the designation of Mexico, the Mexican War,

and the older political history of Southern California, serves as an initial mechanism for sensitizing the reader to what lies beyond the frame, to categories of an essentially spatial *otherness* of which Mexico proper is only the strongest form.

Temporally or historically the reference to the Mexican War sends us back to origins, first of all the origins of California itself in blood guilt and national aggression, in "manifest destiny" (not a theme that unduly preoccupies Chandler), but thereupon, by analogy, and far more significantly, to the origins of the Sternwood family (and the Sternwood fortune) itself. What is paradoxical is that the original General Sternwood is not the answer to the question his portrait raises: the family's fortune comes, not from the spoils of the Mexican War or from the glory of a military career and tradition, but much more recently from *oil* (remember that Chandler was himself in the oil business during the brief boom of the twenties and before he began to write for the pulps): a somewhat different place of origins, which we will visit in the next to last chapter of the novel. This disjunction of money from the martial tradition (essentially: honor) is one of the ways in which Chandler systematically seeks to differentiate his plots and their motivations from those of the classical detective story (which normally presuppose either money or "evil" or both). Yet as we have already seen the place of great wealth is important for the construction of his novels (or better still, for the range of their paths and itineraries), so that it will be important to separate the fact of wealth from its acquisition (something achieved in *Farewell, My Lovely* by the age and weakness of the Grayle figure; something less adequately managed in *The High Window*, as we shall see later on).

All of which is in effect insisted on by the portrait itself, which *stares* at Marlowe and which demands that he look back at it:

> I was still staring at the hot black eyes when a door opened far back under the stairs.
>
> It wasn't the butler coming back. It was a girl. (BS, I, 4)

The portrait, after all, was at most diegetically important in order to explain or at least enable the "motive" of General Sternwood—the fondness for the son-in-law (also marked by a history become past, in his case the IRA) and, by transfer, for Marlowe, or in other words the male-bonding syndrome, a space of "mateship" still relatively "feudal" (or "military") in its connotations, and also anti-feminine in ways which will be significant for this particular plot (with its two daughters as twin sources of disorder).

Now, however, we meet one of the crucial *characters* in both story and narrative, and Chandler must work at setting up a psychopathological "reality" in which he and his readers no doubt still believe, but which for us is the sheerest archaic sexual mythology, namely the concept of "nymphomania." This will be done by means of a battery of gestures and twitches, by some tell-tale signs ("she had little sharp predatory teeth"), but above all by the very "signifier" in which we have already begun to have a little training, namely the Look itself: "Her eyes were slate-gray, and had almost no expression when they looked at me."

This primacy of the "Look" and of looking, of the eyes, as a place in which a signifying system is developed, flexed and underscored, is then confirmed by the final episode of the chapter:

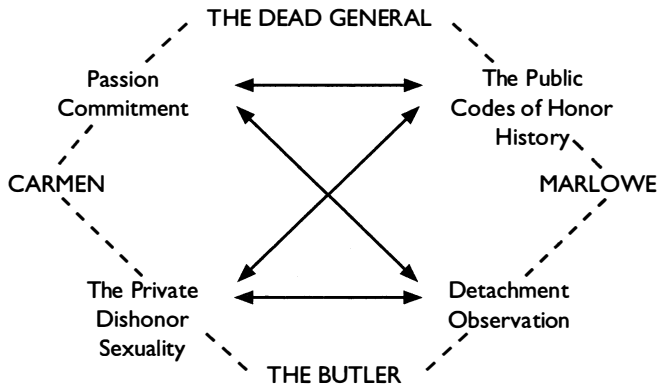
> The butler chose that convenient moment to come back through the French doors and see me holding her. It didn't seem to bother him. He was a tall, thin, silver man, sixty or close to it or a little past it. He had blue eyes as remote as eyes could be. (BS, I, 5)

The first chapter of *The Big Sleep* is therefore something more than a mere anthology of "looks" of various temperatures, colors and expressions: it is the place in which, by way of the Look as a permutation space, a whole system is slowly and cumulatively disengaged, in which we can already glimpse a cluster of important "semes" or traits: passion, fidelity and confidentiality, sexual obsession or pathological obsession (and depersonalization), and so forth.

Following Greimas, we will need at least four fundamental semes, or two fundamental oppositions, in order for this thematic constellation to emerge in the form of some genuine ideological *system*: the process of disengaging it is at least facilitated by the realization that in fact this opening chapter exhibits for our inspection not three pairs of eyes, not three characters (of very unequal diegetic importance), but rather *four*, since the whole encounter is seen through the eyes of Marlowe, a "peeper" and someone whose business is observation. We are not, of course, told what Marlowe's gaze looks like (we know from other sources that his eyes are brown, which adds a rather different note to the spectrum of black / slate-gray / blue, and appropriately enough tends to define itself over against those three hues): the quality of his look is paradoxically conveyed by "voice," by the wise-cracking voice-over which, however, leaves us in permanent doubt as to whether this gaze is cynical or compassionate.

Yet the liminality of the chapter suggests other coordinates as well: this is not merely the threshold of the novel, it is the initial visit to the Sternwood mansion, and thus the boundary between the public world and the private one behind the gates (with, as Chandler puts it elsewhere, "a special brand of sunshine, very quiet, put up in noise-proof containers just for the upper classes" [FML, XVIII, 212]). Yet the military ancestor signifies the public realm and History par excellence. Meanwhile, his "hot black eyes" and Carmen's expressionless ones paradoxically have at least something in common with each other that excludes Marlowe and the butler: namely something like personal commitment, forms of passion which vary in their external expression depending on the public or private nature of that passion, yet which both involve violence and the acknowledgement of the Self and its claims.

These indications are perhaps sufficient to authorize an initial characterization of this "system" as follows:



What is significant here is not merely the way in which this scheme pits Marlowe against Carmen at the very outset, and thus virtually gives the plot away; it is also the care with which Marlowe's function is differentiated from that of the butler, himself also a witness to the shames (and glories) of the Sternwood family and a preserver of their secrecy, a guardian at the threshold of the private realm and of family space. In Greimas' terminology, the butler's is here merely a neutral or neuter function (just as the General's "complex" or "Utopian," function—that of implacable judgment, the judgment of the dead and of the heroic past—is the place of an impossible synthesis).[1]

Meanwhile, it is clear that in a situation in which we have not even begun to meet the more important characters, the content of this still relatively simple and abstract scheme will become greatly modified and the scheme itself will be subject to enrichment and to modification; nor can we, without more closely examining the other novels, conclude that the *contradiction* articulated for us here between "passion" or "self" and the public realm is Chandler's fundamental subject (it may only be the fundamental subject of this particular novel, which turns after all on blackmail).

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[1] See A. J. Greimas, *On Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), and in particular my introduction, which offers a kind of user's manual for the semiotic square.

What can be suggested is that this use of the Look as the vehicle through which the system initially emerges will have an unexpected side-effect, a kind of secondary function and prolongation which has little enough to do with this thematic system. After this initial chapter, indeed, "looks" in Chandler will once again assume more modest proportions in the narrative and in its descriptions (it could not be otherwise, without the text taking on the kind of mannered or high-literary stylization which Chandler's genre must resist under pain of ranging him alongside a Sartre, a Sarraute or a Duras); but *looking* as an activity has been at least momentarily reinforced for us here and lent a symbolic importance that it would not normally have.

Yet at least one powerful tradition of interpretation of the detective story as a genre—that of a certain Freudianism—reads our involvement in such texts and their "passionate" interest for us as a scopic impulse and as the deep repressed attraction of the primal scene; something consistent with Freud at least to the degree that he himself characterized the scientific vocation—the passion to discover and to know, and to learn *secrets*—as a sublimation of the infantile voyeuristic impulse. The concept of a primal scene, indeed, whether it existed in this or that empirical biographical experience, can nonetheless stand as the quintessential expression of belief in and nostalgia for the absolute event, that at which you could be *present*, the event, indeed, that could be a genuine present in its own right, without losing its narrative definition in past or future. My own feeling is that naturalistic explanations of this kind, which appeal to some permanent drive in human nature, are dangerous and ideological indeed; yet in the case of *The Big Sleep* we do not at all need to appeal to some theory of an eternal (Freudian) human nature, we can attribute the reinforcement of the scopic impulse—and the consequent "reinvention" of the driving force in the *genre*, or at least this particular example of it—to the preliminary "work" on looking in the first chapter, and to its systematic exasperation of the relationship between the gaze and the public and the private, between seeing and knowing, secrets, sexuality and historical action itself.

But even more than that rides on the impulses generated by this opening chapter: for this *particular* detective novel turns around a "primal scene" a good deal more literal than the imputed generic one, and one whose structure, as well as its radical absence from the text itself, underscores the peculiar nature of this moment better than any straightforward version of the Freudian myth. *The Big Sleep* has as its diegetic center and pretext *images*: photographs which the verbal narrative cannot give us, and which show Carmen naked (a metonymic primal scene, since it supposedly documents her "nymphomania") and also show her as guilty of or linked to Geiger's murder (by displacement, murder itself becomes a heightened version of the sexual act). On the other hand, the "scene" that Marlowe actually surprises is one of looking and voyeurism: the camera itself positioned over against Carmen looking like "a totem pole. It had a profile like an eagle and its wide round eye was a camera lens. The lens was aimed at the naked girl in the chair. There was a blackened flash bulb clipped to the side of the totem pole" (BS, VII, 22–3). To which we should add that, as in Hitchcock's films, the momentary lightning of the flashbulb is both a homicidal and a sexual assault, and also that in the sentences immediately following this one, Chandler quite gratuitously remarks on the dead Geiger's "glass eye," as though the bookseller's own lens-and-flash-bulb had similarly flared, burning his life out along with it in the process. But all this suggests a perspective in which Chandler's novel—the "debased" or subcultural practice of a genre which cheaply panders to voyeurism and the scopic impulse (to repeat some of the moralizing typical of the Frankfurt School's analysis of mass culture)—turns upon itself and includes within itself a figurative meditation on its own nature, as voyeurism and the longing to see, even for a minute, the "real," the "event," in the form of the forbidden photograph.[2]

[2] Photographs are also central in *The Little Sister* and, more surprisingly (see below), *The High Window*, where the terms of the description are richly suggestive from a Freudian standpoint: "'Why that's Mr. Bright,' she said. 'It's not a very good picture, is it? And that's Mrs. Murdock—Mrs. Bright she was then—right behind him. Mr. Bright looks mad.' ... 'Look,' I said... 'that is a

Still, one should not leave a psychoanalytic revision of the text without some indication as to how its social and historical dimension might then be reestablished. This can be done, one would think, essentially or at least initially through that thematics of private and public on which we have already touched and which constitute a historical rather than a merely topological opposition (that is, the emergence of privacy and of "private life," of private "experience," including sexuality, the sterilizing of a public life which is gradually felt to be set off against all that—this emergence and this opposition is a historical event and not, certainly, a permanent feature of social life observable in all societies).

The denotative aspects of the raw material of the detective story as a genre—relationship to the history of the city; emergence of a surveillance society and the role of surveillance in a market system in full transformation; relationship between public and private police, etc.—offer a rather different line of approach than that indicated above and mediated by psychoanalysis, or at least by the analytic theme of the "primal scene." One is tempted to reintegrate this theme into a sociological perspective by way of Goffman's front-back distinction (particularly as MacCannell has developed it in *The Tourist*):

> We can trace changes in the plant layout of specific industrial and commercial organizations [which] show an increase in front, both as regards the exterior of the head-office building and as regards the conference rooms, main halls, and waiting-rooms of these buildings ... we can observe the up-grading of domestic establishments, wherein the kitchen, which once possessed its own back regions, is now coming to be the least presentable region of the house while at the same time becoming more and more presentable.[3]

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snapshot of Mrs. Elizabeth Bright Murdock giving her first husband the heave out of his office window. He's falling. Look at the position of his hands. He's screaming with fear'" (HW, XXXV).

[3] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 247–8. See also Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist* (New York: Schocken, 1976), particularly Chapter 5.

What happens, however, is that the private, "unpresentable" areas behind the official reception rooms and "fronts" come to be considered little by little as more "real" than the areas designed for public appearance: it is in the backrooms then, and behind the scenes, that some more authentic activity takes place; and it is felt that only those who know such operations "from the inside," that is to say, who know what goes on behind the counter and in the backroom, have any genuine knowledge (or know-how). MacCannell rewrites all this in order to describe tourism proper—the activity of seeing how other people "really" live—as a ritual whereby the quest for the *authentic*—most often a failure, and considered risible by more "authentic" and sophisticated travelers—serves to confirm the ideological opposition between authentic and inauthentic, serves therefore in a quasi-metaphysical way to reconfirm the idea of "reality" itself. His book has at any rate the two-fold merit of grasping hermeneutic activity (whether that of the textual interpreter or that of Marlowe and other detectives) 1) as a ritual, as an activity whose connotative meaning confirms and secures an ideology which greatly transcends its immediate denotative intent (the immediate solution to the enigma or problem); and 2) as a spatial form, that is, as an activity whose fundamental material organization is to be found in space (rather than in cognitive categories).

The "solution" of the mystery or mysteries—in any case notoriously incomprehensible in Chandler—is to be sharply distinguished from the closure of the narrative (from what lends it its completeness and its illusion of "totality"), since it takes place on another level altogether, that of the narrative raw materials (the story or fable). At best, this more "cognitive" clarification of the enigma will stand as a mere *sign* of closure, as the latter's *analogon* within the narrative. Nor can the "imaginary" dimension of the story materials—e.g., doubles, attitudes towards women, the place of libidinal investment, of affect, the objects and products of a properly fantasy-producing activity—be isolated as the place of closure either.

The problem is that when we find ourselves driven out of these areas, in which or from which reader and writer can reflect in

some synthesizing way (cognitive or affective) on the interrelationships between the events, we are confronted with a series of episodes linked only in the most tenuous ways. Genetically, of course, the early novels are something like collages, in which a series of separately published stories—sketches or finger exercises—were carefully sewn together into longer book sequences (but even those original stories were themselves structurally episodic; a fine early text like "Trouble is my Business" is virtually a Chandler novel in miniature—which means that the problem of the autonomy of the various episodes remains intact).

The issue becomes even more perplexing when we grow aware of the degree to which these various episodes are structurally homologous. The transfer of a color dominant from a given setting (e.g., white, in Vivian's room, *The Big Sleep*, III) to the description and presentation of a character (gray, Eddie Mars, *The Big Sleep*, XIII) suggests a kind of symbiosis between character and place which will be maintained throughout the novels, but which demands explanation in its own right. I would suggest that it can be accounted for by the hypothesis that the primitive or rudimentary form of the episode in Chandler is the *interview* itself, whose ur-form as in pre-Aeschylean drama involves no more than two actors at any given time. Marlowe does not tend to catch people in the street, like a reporter, so that the visit and the interview situation tend to be at one with a whole architectural framework, approach to a building, room, interior and furnishings (of which, once again, the attention to clothing and fashion would seem to be something of a secondary derivative).

This is, however, rather different from naturalization in the Balzac tradition (where clothing and housing are seen as so many exoskeletons and camouflage secreted by a particular social "species"), since, as has been suggested above, there is in Chandler a fundamental distance between human space or habitation and the Nature of Southern California; the realm of the first, and Los Angeles in general, is here marked as artificial rather than as natural.

Yet this very distance allows for bravura passages, among the most interesting in Chandler, in which it is the gradual or tortuous

approach to the interview situation (and less often the withdrawal from it) which becomes foregrounded. Whence the emblematic and well-nigh mythic value of the private entrance and the private road (Idle Valley, from *The High Window*, XVII), through a virtual citizens' uprising (*The Little Sister*, XXVI), to the embourgeoisement of *The Long Goodbye* (XIII); but also the diegetic mysteries of Marlowe's entry by night into Harry Jones' office (*The Big Sleep*, XXVI) or by day into the silence of the Lavery house on Altair Street (*The Lady in the Lake*, XV). All of which may be reduced to the screen door which separates Jessie Florian's bungalow (*Farewell, My Lovely*, V) from the "dried out brown lawn in front" and metonymically sums up her shabby existence: yet another approach to the "primal scene," like those windows in Hitchcock (*I Confess* or *Psycho*) through which, fatefully, the camera discovers the body.

Yet Vivian Regan's white interior ("like a fresh fall of snow at Lake Arrowhead") and Jessie Florian's room full of junk ("a couple of frayed lamps with once gaudy shades that were now as gay as superannuated streetwalkers") mark out the two permutations of Chandlerian *ekphrasis*: the astonishingly "sensitive" evocation of women's fashions or interior furnishings, whose tone can range from the "neutral" one of a Barthesian fashion magazine, demonstrating sheer technical "know-how," to the most typically American and populist sarcasm in the voice-over; and the enumeration of broken or worn items which have for the most part lost their brand-names, becoming the anonymous world of objects of the lower-class Chandler neighborhoods, the boarding or flophouses, Beacon Hill, the cheap hotel lobbies with their battered spittoons and deep leather chairs.

What must be stressed about this discursive polarization—which is also a sociological one—is that Chandler's "poor," far from being working class in any sense, are members of what would today be called the "underclasses": Lumpens, non-workers, social "flotsam and jetsam," people as broken as the furniture and buildings in which they live. But by the same token, it would be premature to assimilate "privilege" in Chandler, in the sense in which the term applies to fashionable descriptions which are often

as class-conscious as any socialist-realist text, too immediately to class categories, either in the social sense of a bourgeoisie or in the political and economic sense of a "ruling" class, of a capitalist class, of the owners of the means of production or whatever. I have begun to suggest above, indeed, that one of Chandler's originalities, one of the ways in which he felt himself consciously to be modifying the genre (and the genre even as he inherited it from Hammett), was the attempt to substitute some other kind of motivation for the standard financial or materialist one (and this substitution, at its most successful, will take the form of the threats posed to men by predatory women). For the displacement to be successful, however, the place or locus of wealth must be "managed" with some skill; and one would want to distinguish the way in which the source of their wealth has been somehow muffled or mediated in Grayle or in General Sternwood (not only by old age in these two cases), from the widowhood of Mrs. Murdock, the magical riches of Hollywood in *The Little Sister* (Chandler's only approach to this particular setting), or—above all—the mysterious aloofness of Harlan Potter (in *The Long Goodbye*), in which last, however, power and money (as the object of murder, for instance) have been dissociated. What can be concluded in a provisional way is that, while Chandler needs the category of the "rich" in some form, the locus of wealth is in his work somehow unoccupied (a way of saying, perhaps, that there are no *capitalists* in Chandler's novels either); "rich" characters come therefore to be defined by way of their houses and interiors, they are those who inhabit the spaces of "fashion" analyzed above.

But this would lead us on to other sociological distinctions in Chandler, or, more accurately, to other spaces or slots in the social typology with which his work seems to present us. It will come as no particular surprise to find that we remember such "types" on the basis of the houses and interiors with which they are associated, rather than for their own characterological merits; and also that the more strongly marked of such typologizing episodes are remembered in relative independence of their narrative context. We are not terribly sure in which novel this or that episode took

place; each of the six novels has its own specific atmosphere, but the stronger episodes are also remembered distinctly, and in a different place in the mind, as though the effects in Chandler were somehow stereoptic, the molar effects (of the plot as a whole) radically dissociated from the molecular effects of these particular episodes.

The ensuing comparisons are at least instructive insofar as they sensitize us to the "obligatory" episodes, to a certain number of indispensable episode-types. The inaugural visit to the wealthy client, for instance—revealingly displaced in *Farewell, My Lovely*, but "rendered" once and for all in *The Big Sleep*—has something interesting to tell us about that most interesting and characteristic of all Chandler's failures, *The High Window*, where clearly enough Mrs. Murdock's isolation and her port-sipping was meant to be the feminine analogue (including appropriate structural inversions) of General Sternwood's greenhouse. It did not manage to be that, evidently: for one thing, a Pasadena house is no substitute for the Sternwood estate, because—as will be emphasized below—it does not articulate relations with nature in the same way. Meanwhile,.as has already been suggested, the widow's inheritance of her husband's fortune is, if anything, too clearly articulated, by contrast with the relative mystery of the Sternwood fortune and with General Sternwood's "distance" from it. Finally, the Brasher Doubloon is a regressive substitute for the photographs in *The Big Sleep*, or *The Little Sister*, replacing the "image" with coinage (albeit of a more historical, aesthetic or archeological "stamp"); it is a throwback to the more romantic Hammett formula of *The Maltese Falcon*, and yet still manages to provoke the return of the repressed of a photographic image in its denouement. At any rate, *The High Window* poses an interesting problem which will serve us as a guiding thread for the rest of this discussion: why do we not feel its shape nearly as strongly and sharply as the other novels; why is it more of a failure, formally, than the unsuccessful *Little Sister*; above all, how can we make judgments like these when *The High Window* also contains some of the most remarkable and archetypal episodes in Chandler?

I am thinking, for example, of the office of Elisha Morningstar (the crooked numismatist) and of the murder on Beacon Hill (previewed in "The King in Yellow")—a place which is the quintessential flop-house neighborhood for Chandler, who lived there briefly in a somewhat more prosperous era and took Angel's Flight to work daily. The only strongly competitive alternate version here would seem to be Orrin Quest's boarding house (in *The Little Sister*), but that is in Bay City and thus connoted rather differently (meanwhile, Jessie Florian's is a detached private cottage and thus not comparable). The Beacon Hill rooming-house victim, however, has other equivalencies throughout Chandler, being Marlowe's bad mirror image and the very type of the unsuccessful private detective (compare Harry Jones, in *The Big Sleep*; Goble in *Playback*; as well as a whole species of hotel detectives—perhaps a somewhat different typological slot?—at any rate involving a whole "system" in which Marlowe and the police equally figure). Harry Jones' shabby office is the counterpart of G. A. Phillips' shabby rooming house; but certainly the shabby office building, in general, is a fundamental component of the Chandler cityscape, here secured by Morningstar's office. The latter, as a sociological type, would seem, taken narrowly, to represent the various kinds of experts on whom the rich have occasion to call from time to time (but I can only remember one other, the authenticator of documents Arbogast in the story "Trouble is my Business," in some ways a trial run for this novel). In a more general or figurative sense, however, the "Morningstar" position would appear to be related to all those professionals who pander in one way or another to the needs of the rich, but most specifically with overtones of "vice" (Geiger's bookstore), and most numerically represented in the novels by crooked physicians or quacks of various kinds—Amthor and Sonderborg in *Farewell, My Lovely*, Almore in *The Lady in the Lake*, Lagardie in *The Little Sister*, and Verringer in *The Long Goodbye* (Chandler seems to have been much less interested in attorneys). These generally have their offices in their homes, which is a step up the ladder of spatial status in Chandler's work.

Below them, one is tempted to make room for a kind of character whose "home" *is* his "office," if you know what I mean, namely the gigolo, whose manifestation in *The High Window* (Vannier) is perhaps not nearly so sharp as his avatars in *Farewell, My Lovely* (Lindsay Marriott) and in *The Lady in the Lake* (Lavery); the figure shows up briefly and unexpectedly as a kind of Hollywood producer in *The Little Sister*, and then even more unexpectedly becomes the romantic lead and the protagonist in *The Long Goodbye*. Chandler feels these people to be rather unmanly, hence the overtones of effeminacy and homosexuality which tie figures like Marriott back into the more obscure relationships of *The Big Sleep*.

The gigolos are, however, to be distinguished sharply from other figures who sometimes resemble them slightly, but whose positioning and evaluation by Chandler are among the most interesting problems in his work. These are, of course, the gangsters —Eddie Mars in *The Big Sleep*, Brunette in *Farewell, My Lovely*, Alex Morny in *The High Window*, and Steelgrave in *The Little Sister*; they often have sidekick figures who are more "evil" (Canino in *The Big Sleep*, Eddie Prue in *The High Window*, and surviving without a "boss" figure, the Menendez and Starr of *The Long Goodbye*); of them, we might venture to say that their "office" is their "home," since the appropriate interviews (when they do not take place on somebody else's turf entirely) are almost always staged in the gambling casino, or, most dramatically at all, on the gambling boat of *Farewell, My Lovely*. But the peculiarity of Chandler's gangsters—his way of modifying this stock figure so that the stock plot resolution of "organized crime" is neutralized—is that they have hearts of gold, Marlowe *likes* them (as he sometimes even likes certain policemen), they often have trouble with their wives like anybody else, and they are almost always *understanding*.

This sequence of social types—the rich, the poor, crooked professionals, gigolos, gangsters, and the police—would seem fairly adequately to exhaust the typology of the *male* figures in Chandler's novels (the women figures are certainly positioned socially, but would seem to find their dynamic in a rather different "libidinal"

apparatus which turns around stereotypical "unconscious" archetypes like the "belle dame sans merci" or the woman "pal" and likeable but non-sexual co-detective). What has been implicit in the development of this typology, however, and what must now be more explicitly stressed, is its relationship to space, and the way in which spatial configurations articulate it as a system, and also provide the means for "rendering" this or that exemplification.

The thematics of private and public take on at least one dominant symbolic expression in Chandler, an expression which is in many ways canonical for the hard-boiled detective genre as a whole: namely the fact of the *office*, or better still, the twin possession by certain characters (most notably Marlowe himself) of both an office and a private dwelling (most often an apartment). A case might be made—but not in this context—for grasping one of the social and ritual functions of the detective story as a reinvention of the myth of the private, of private space and personal or private life (I will only note here the fantasmatic and excessive attention paid to the private dwellings and lives of the detectives themselves, most strikingly in the stereotypical popular fantasy—textually quite erroneous—that Marlowe sleeps in his office, keeps his phone in the icebox, etc., etc.).

At any rate, the coordination of home and office allows us to project a very summary permutation scheme, in which the logical possibilities turn out in fact to correspond to the sociological typology developed above:

1. There are, first of all, people who have homes *without* offices: these are, paradoxically, either the very rich or the very poor.
2. There are those who have *both*, and they are professionals in the service of the rich, mostly crooked but also occasionally the structural inversion of this last, namely honorable (e.g., Marlowe himself!)
3. There are characters for whom home and office become in one way or another identified and coterminous: a) the gigolos, whose home is their office; b) the gangsters, whose office (casino, etc.) is their home.

4. Finally, there is a logical possibility about which we have not yet spoken, namely those who possess offices *without* homes. I will suggest that this corresponds to the category of the *police*, who are always seen in their precinct buildings as though they had no equivalent of what, for civilians, would be private life and private living space.

We will examine the phenomenological meaning of such "offices" in the next chapter: for the moment, it suffices to test the structuralist "aesthetic" principle that our impressionistic sense of closure or the completeness of the narrative as a whole stands in direct proportion to the systematic exhaustion of the logical possibilities in the permutational scheme we have offered. The problem with this hypothesis is that its terms apply perfectly well to *The High Window*, in which all the logical possibilities are quite adequately represented, all the social types portrayed, and yet which palpably fails to yield the sense of global narrative closure produced by the other three major novels of the first cycle: it is a whole whose parts are very often superlative, but which does not add up, for reasons we have not yet been able to grasp or formulate.

I want to try to do this by staging a disjunction between the social typology we have just established—along with the urban space and buildings to which it corresponds—and something else, which it will be just as easy to call Nature. The coexistence of the urban and the natural landscapes is indeed one of the more striking features of Los Angeles, as compared to more classical cities, which *replace* the natural, or which are at best, as urban *wholes*, contiguous to some great natural site, the bays of San Francisco or Sydney, say. Houses in the Los Angeles canyons, however, are still city dwellings, and the then nascent literature of suburbia (with its special aesthetic dilemmas) is thus radically excluded from Chandler's Southern California.

This is to say that, in this particular Los Angeles at least, both dimensions—of the urban and of the natural—are in play simultaneously at all times; neither is effaced by the other, as would be the case in a spatially different kind of literary practice. On

the other hand, in Chandler the two dimensions—however they coincide or overlap—nonetheless remain *distinct*, whether we can go so far as to describe them as being in *tension*—let alone in *contradiction*—or not. We must thus read Chandler's novels on two staves or two distinct scales all at once, and this from the very outset: in *The Big Sleep* we visit a quintessential selection of houses, rooms, and offices—a whole panoply of specifically urban spaces—*and* we *also* live in Nature, most dramatically by keeping an eye on the weather and observing the progress of rain clouds over the foothills. The chapter sequence of *The Big Sleep* is in this respect a virtual fever chart of weather: clouds, drizzle, bright sun, fog, heavy rain and automobile lights in the darkness; a sequence which has its own logic and about which it would be premature indeed to suppose that—following the old "expressive fallacy"—it entertained any meaningful symbolic relationship with the sequence of human events taking place simultaneously in urban space proper.

The realm of the weather—and Chandler's attention to it—turns out in fact to be the unifying mechanism of these novels, in a far more concrete fashion than the complex plots themselves: it is the evolution of the weather, particularly in *The Big Sleep*—waiting for rain, the bright sunlight next morning—which holds together the otherwise random or even centrifugal tendency of the episodes to drift apart from one another, to become "timeless" unities in their own right. It would seem, therefore, that we are here on the track of a principle of closure rather different from anything available in the social or urban typology, but whose mechanism for the moment seems cyclical, or at least predominantly temporal, and thus lacking in that momentary equivalence of time and space upon which the sense of aesthetic closure necessarily depends.

Meanwhile, the criticism of art and architecture alike has accustomed us to notions of "metaphorization," whereby a "cultural" space or element is read in terms of a "natural" one, and vice versa. In Chandler it seems at least minimally certain that our capacity to perceive his peculiar urban space—from Southern California mansions to shabby hotel lobbies, from

downtown office buildings to canyons or private roads leading to exclusive residential compounds staffed by private police—is stimulated by and constitutively dependent on our sense of the natural ecology of the Los Angeles basin itself, from foothills to port or bay.

Yet it seems equally important not to grasp such perceptions in any static or fragmented way, as some mere inert act of "situating" an event—and the space of an event—geographically:

> It was a cheerful room with good furniture and not too much of it. The French windows in the end wall opened on a stone porch and looked across the dusk at the foothills. (BS, XIV, 48)

The proper reading of such a narrative moment involves the conviction that "geographical space," in the sense of natural setting, the foothills and so forth, is not merely one more piece of descriptive information which can be optionally added on to other types of physical data about the room, but rather that the first kind of datum is of a radically different order from the second (which might have to do with interior furnishings), and that we must develop in ourselves, in order to read such a passage properly, the sense that two distinct languages are being drawn on here, that two radically distinct systems are herein juxtaposed. Meanwhile, the metaphysical temptation must also be resisted, namely the attempt to transform this juxtaposition into a statement and the expression of some eternal pathos: the room in which a violent death will happen, itself then transfigured by the eternity of the natural cycle that presides over it, as though the insignificance of human passions were suddenly dramatized by an opening to the infinity of the heavens. Rather, it seems to me that such notations should be read as the momentary intermeshing of two distinct yet complete systems, each of which has a kind of closure specific to it. We have already schematically mapped out the social typology at work in Chandler's narratives, and it is a typology which has a logical completeness of its own as a system, even though from the standpoint of the analysis of social class it is significantly

flawed and incomplete in such a way as to make its very illusion or projection of "completeness" or of "totality" an ideological act or even a kind of false consciousness. The natural or geographical code then has its own traditional closure, although of a very different type.

One is tempted, in trying to think the possible modes of interaction between these codes or systems, to rework Roman Jakobson's well-known characterization of poetic language as the "projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination."[4] The formula usefully conveys the sense that each such axis has its own specific dynamic or logic or principle, so that the long shadow that one axis projects upon the other is more concretely to be read as the illicit transfer of the rhythms and lawfulness of one system into another normally governed by quite different principles.

With this in mind, I will suggest that closure in Chandler's novels is achieved by something like the projection of the axis of geography or nature onto that of society; and that the intermeshing of these two codes or systems allows for the transfer of closure as such from the vaster totality of the natural landscape to the far more questionable and purely logical systematization of the social order. The landscape of Southern California in other words returns on Chandler's own limited ideological (and even personal or private) view of the social realm to confer on this last a kind of completeness. It is a rather different operation than the kind of "naturalization" which Barthes and others saw as being essential to any ideological move: in Chandler, there can never be any question that the social order of Southern California is "natural," its artificiality is on the contrary underscored at every moment. The naturalizing move here intervenes not on the level of individual social types or institutions, but rather in the aesthetic claim that Chandler has touched all the bases, that this itemization of the flora and fauna of Los Angeles county is an exhaustive one, that the "representation" of the various elements, poles, forces, *actants*,

[4] Roman Jakobson, "Concluding Statement", in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), p. 358.

of this social order—however photographic or not—is somehow a complete thing in its own right.

But closure—the achievement of a sense of narrative totality—must not be confused with the merely formal ending or conclusion of a work, something Chandler's last and least successful novel demonstrates. I have so often been unjust to *The Long Goodbye* that my most recent rereading suggests the moment of making amends. Indeed, a confrontation with the problem of film adaptation may be indulged on the occasion of his last completed novel, which also raises questions about the breakdown or exhaustion of the narrative apparatus so triumphantly rehearsed in the earlier books. For we have not yet raised the interesting matter of Altman's film version, the most personal, idiosyncratic and outrageous of all the movie versions of Chandler's novels (all have been filmed at least once), but which will have even more insistent claims on those for whom Altman is as important as Chandler in his own way and for whom this film is also one of his masterpieces. To be sure, Elliott Gould is very far indeed from the ideal Marlowe Chandler himself imagined for the silver screen (to have been played by Cary Grant!); while the change of ending is something like Altman's decisive rebuke to the excessive sentimentality of the novel, and to its celebration, if not of the homoerotic impulse, then certainly of the male-bonding syndrome.

Yet it is precisely this change of ending which suggests a more adequate way of grasping the relationship of novel to film version than the customary "representational" one (in the sense in which we ask whether the film is "faithful" to the book; whether Bogart is a more satisfactory Marlowe than Dick Powell, etc.). From symbol to allegory, from identity to difference, from homology or replication to structural distance and differentiation: the changeover in these critical values also has its equivalent here, as in the feeling of the newer film criticism—addressing an analogous problem of the relationship between images or shots and words or voice-over *within* a given filmic text—that such relationships were more intense when there was a lag, a dissonance, a non-correspondence, between these two registers, than when they harmonized with

each other to the point of constituting each other's mere "illustration" or "example."

Perhaps, in a similar way, the intensities of this peculiar new "object of study"—the *filmed novel*—are greatest when both novel and film are felt to have equal status, and to comment mutually upon each other. At any rate, Altman's gesture—the palpable disgust with the Chandlerian sentimentality and with Marlowe's inexplicable indulgence for the gigolo-protagonist—has the effect of reconfirming the objectivity of the plot itself, of making this last appear as a virtual object, as an objective fantasy, somewhere in between the two texts, each of which becomes a way of making an alternative evaluation and taking an opposing position on their shared object. Perhaps, indeed, only thus can a filmic adaptation keep faith with an original of great quality: not by seeking to reproduce it faithfully, but by letting it "be in its being," as Heidegger would have said; respecting its uniqueness and difference by transforming it into something so radically distinct that both works appear on the retina separately. Walter Benjamin had a theory of translation that seems relevant here: the point of a good one, he argued, was not to fashion an equivalent of its original in a foreign tongue, but rather to demonstrate the *impossibility* of such translation and to hint at the strange resources and syntax of the other language, at its specific effects of which our own is incapable. Ultimately, perhaps, only thus do film and novel preserve their own autonomy—an autonomy which is strengthened precisely by their differences with the identity each shares with the other.

But if pairing the novel with Altman's film gives us one object of study, matching it against *The Big Sleep* gives us yet another, and it is here that we will find the formal clues both to the possibility of this rather unexpected late work, and to its structural uniqueness. Another system or typology can obviously be disengaged here, which incorporates the basic types of the vamp-murderess, the woman pal, the professional woman, and the "mousy," timid or provincial type (as she evolves from *The High Window* to *The Little Sister*). The overall logic of the Chandler plot will be useful

in rotating these "types" so swiftly that they blur into one another, substitute for one another, or unmask each other as the hidden reality of the other's appearance.

But there exist "masculine" versions of these plot dynamics, versions in which a variant of the same sexual ideology is expressed—now generally called "male-bonding syndrome," male backlash and fear of independent women which takes the form of "mateship" and the drawing together of men in strong protective friendships—but which also seems to me to emit formal effects of a somewhat different type. I think, for instance, of Ernst Bloch's doctrine of Hope, with its two archetypal mythic or narrative expressions: the tale of the Egyptian Helen, and Hebel's little story, "Unexpected Reunion" ("Unverhofftes Wiedersehen," taken up again by E.T.A. Hoffmann and others)—narratives in which a beloved—lost to hope, and seemingly forever—miraculously reappears. In the myth of the other Helen, she had never, to be sure, really been lost after all: it was for a mere simulacrum that the Trojans fought, the "real" Helen safe all the while in Egypt—and thereby, as it were, two kinds of wishes were fulfilled simultaneously, the wish consummated and abolished (in fulfillment, presence, satisfaction), and the wish to wish reaffirmed, perpetuated, enjoyed in the perpetual deferment of the Trojan War. In the Hebel story, a miner is killed on his wedding day; sixty years later, a fresh landslide reveals his youthful body—preserved without a trace of injury—to the aged widow on the point of entering her own grave.

This "most beautiful story in the world" (Bloch) with its bitter "happy ending" compresses the time of a life, of generations, of a whole historical cycle, into a reflexive anecdote about wishing proper, on the order of the reflexivity of the fairy tale. To stage an effect of this kind in the more leisurely, properly epic proportions of the novel itself would seem to involve the planned throwaway of the rich content of a lived time which is suddenly unmasked as appearance. One thinks of *Vertigo*, or, for a representation which hesitates perpetually on the verge of the reversal without choosing, which perpetuates the ambiguity itself, of Antonioni's *L'Avventura*:

but film obviously has a different relationship to the present of the image and is able to pay a less onerous price aesthetically for this "reversal" that can so easily look more like a mere trick (*à la* Nabokov).

The Big Sleep is, as I've suggested elsewhere, one of the rare narratives to have been willing to pay the price for such an effect, and to have committed the most substance to it. Chandler's false quests trigger cycles of blood-letting and violence which seem virtually normal events in this world, until we discover their vanity and irrelevance to a search whose object—as in *The Big Sleep*—has been dead and buried long before the novel began or the trail of fresh bloodshed set in. The tease of a central character whose name is omnipresent in the interviews and their peripeties, but who has never been where we think he is (or who turns out to be dying the first chance we get to look him in the face, as in *The Little Sister*)—this seeming trick is perhaps the figure for a whole metaphysic.

What I wanted to note, however, is that in all respects *The Long Goodbye* is simply a structural reversal of this. The protagonist dies unexpectedly in an early chapter, and we, Marlowe, the novel, and its intrigue, must continue without him, new clients emerging in the peculiar desolation of this definitive absence. (Nor can I help thinking that Marlowe's move, out of the typical Los Angeles apartments, of which he has had several, into the isolation of a "small hillside house on a deadend street with a long flight of redwood steps to the front door and a grove of eucalyptus trees across the way"[5] is not unrelated to the peculiarly terminal atmosphere of this novel.) The return then—the film replaying backwards, its figures rising back into place in the very light traces of their fall—is less a resurrection than the unmasking of a presence that was already there, like some sonorous overtone from which a momentary band of silence has been removed. In both these novels—first and last—something is being demonstrated about the very spectrum of reality itself, and about the distance

[5] Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), p.4.

between our perceptions or its appearance, and the permanency of its levels—blank or absent in *The Big Sleep*, unexpectedly present in *The Long Goodbye*, yet for much of the book imperceptible to our own more limited sense organs. The reappearance of Terry Lennox is, however, no more a happy ending than the definitive disappearance of Rusty in *The Big Sleep* is a tragic one. Perhaps it is rather the other classical storytelling formula—common to both novels—which should be retained for this final note: the farewell to the characters. "I never saw any of them again."

Chapter 3

The Barrier at the End of the World

Still, Altman's modification of the ending of *The Long Goodbye,* which rescues it as an essentially episodic structure, does not yet solve for us the problem of the failure of *The High Window* as a narrative form. *The Long Goodbye* was vitiated by its sentimental content, something that cannot be invoked in an analysis of the earlier novel. Nor can the latter's conclusion—the great height of the eponymous title, the fall into the void, not waving but "screaming with fear"—be thought to lack the power, either of a solution to the mystery or of the conclusion of the narrative. But closure and the sense of totality are somehow formally distinct from endings and solutions. Inveterate rereaders of Chandler will know that it is no longer for the solution to the mystery that they do so; if indeed the solutions solved anything to begin with. The story of Bogart's argument with Hawks during the filming of *The Big Sleep* is well known: very late at night, after much drinking, they disagree over the status of the dead body in the Buick in the ocean off the Lido pier—murder, suicide or some third thing? They finally call Chandler himself up, still awake and drinking at that hour, and he admits he can't remember either. Sometimes he aggressively foregrounds the more improbable plot mechanisms, daring us to throw the book away in disbelief: "'And at that point,' I said, 'you run into a real basic coincidence, the only one I'm

willing to admit in the whole picture. For this Mildred Haviland met a man named Bill Chess in a Riverside beer parlor and for reasons of her own married him and went to live with him at Little Fawn Lake'," etc. (LL, XXVII, 578). At others it is presumably the speed of rotation of the plot that can be counted on to distract us from everything that is unmotivated or gratuitous about certain episodes: that of Amthor and the marijuana cigarettes in *Farewell, My Lovely*, for example (triumphantly refashioned into a whorehouse with a Lesbian madame in Dick Richards' 1975 film version). Finally it is for the episodes themselves that you reread; in this, as in a few other features, Chandler participates in the logic of modernism generally, which tends towards an autonomization of ever smaller segments (the separate chapters of *Ulysses* are only the most dramatic emblem of the process). But as Chandler's project-units remain sub-generic, this has the unexpected bonus that we can compare successive versions of the same form in their published variants, which have not, as in the "great moderns," been welded together in some single "book of the world" whose repetitions would be stylistic rather than narrative. So it is that little by little we begin to collect these episode-types (at least in the four first and canonical novels; Chandlerians will have their weakness for this or that feature of the later two, but we are there already beyond the naive or natural operations of the original form): we juxtapose Harry Jones and George Anson Phillips (inept private detectives); or Laird Brunette and Eddie Mars or Alex Morny (likeable mobsters); or Vannier, Marriott or Lavery (quintessential gigolos)—and a new kind of stereoscopic reading emerges in which each scene retains its sharpness in our eye but designates a well-nigh Platonic (yet social-typological) ultimate unit behind it that the reading eye can no longer see as such but only intuit.

So it is that the ideal reader of these detective stories begins to dream of a synoptic Chandler which like the equivalent edition of the four Gospels would run the equivalent episodes side by side for our inspection, projecting some canonical Ur-version of the archetypical Chandler master narrative by way of the ultimate dialectic of Identity and Difference. Unfortunately for this illusion

of the ultimate mythical ur-text, the form of the autonomous episode, like the atom itself, is ultimately not really indivisible: for when the would-be compiler of such synoptic columns works his way back to the pulp-magazine short stories that are predictably their first versions (and that in hindsight lend the mature Chandler novel that truly "modern" sense of patches sewn together in which the seams and transitions constitute the truest locus of aesthetic production), he discovers—as with electrons and quarks within the seeming unity of the atom as such—that the "original" episodes have themselves already been contaminated by the autonomization process and thereby dissociated or uncoupled into so many micro-episodes in their own right. The alternate interpretation is plausible enough—that Chandler "lacked imagination" and, reduced to these few episodes and charactertypes, found himself obliged to repeat them over and over again under different guises—but those who feel this way will probably not wish to read any further in the present pages, whose thesis is rather that it was his society that "lacked imagination" and that such undoubted limits are those of the narrativity of Chandler's sociohistorical raw material.

Still, the discovery of this micro-episodic dimension of the text beneath the larger official and ostensible plot mysteries and solutions of the Chandler novel as such suggests two new and complementary lines of inquiry. The first lies in that of a system whose intelligibility could be expected to displace and replace that causal explanation in terms of the interrelationships of intrigue and action that we have already found to be somewhat less than reliable: this would presumably be a synchronic system in which the various episode- or character-types entertained formalizable semiotic relationships and oppositions with each other.

Alongside the project of disengaging that system, and in direct proportion to the success in doing so, there then emerges a second kind of analytic interest, bearing on the peculiar nature of Chandler's plot construction: for the older logic of cause-and-effect (or of deduction) will here evidently be replaced by some new criterion for the dealing out of a hand of episodes, and the

aesthetic whereby the rhythm of their succession or alternation is governed. I've suggested that at a higher level of historical or periodizing abstraction, this operation probably rejoins the modernist form-problem par excellence, which is the invention and production of transitions. But Chandler's version of it is specific and has its own logic.

Meanwhile, both these lines of inquiry converge on the supreme matter of what we have called narrative closure, which, whatever its fate in the modern and postmodern, continues to reign supreme in the mass culture of this period, and is if anything exacerbated by the peculiar nature of the detective story as such. (It could be argued that even the serial—the fundamental exhibit in any case for the openness or indeterminacy of the newer mass culture[1]—reconfirms the value of closure over and over again by its intent to thwart and frustrate it.) Yet Chandler liked to argue, as we have already seen, that in matters of style he tricked his audience by giving them something other (and better) than what they wanted, thereby satisfying them in spite of themselves: perhaps in the matter of closure something similar is going on, whereby the satisfaction of the detective-story-puzzle has in reality been assuaged by something else—in the event something doubly spatial, as we shall see later.

I

The first source of closure is, however, the narrative content itself, whose deeper finitude is reflected in something more temporal than its capacity to be wrapped up neatly and tied into a well-made plot: it is a temporal closure more strongly marked in French than in English, and there theorized (by Gide and others) under the distinction between *récit* and narrative, where the untranslatable generic word designates the classic tale-telling of events which are

[1] See Tania Modleski's brilliant chapter on the soaps as an emergent form of decentered narrative, in *Loving with a Vengeance* (Handen, CT: Archon, 1982), pp. 90ff.

over and done with before the story begins or the narrator lifts his voice, something signaled by the more elaborate system of French tenses and in particular the use of the preterite, whose presence is generally invisible in English, being undistinguishable from our generalized past tense. But this—rather than the distinctions in social content or in gentility or violence—is the mark of the more fundamental generic shift from English to American (hard-boiled) detective story, namely that where the classic tradition (continued in the former) maintained a structure discontinuity and differentiation between open narrative (the detective's quest) and the closed *récit* of the crime to be reconstructed, the newer American form, as it began to emerge in the pulps, redoubled the closure of the crime with that of the surface quest itself, which it also staged, after the fact, as a completed adventure.

What we witness here, I think—what is now difficult to perceive from the hindsight of a future in which the originary medium has itself virtually disappeared—is the omnipresence of radio culture as it resonates out into the other genres and media. Both pulp or hard-boiled detective stories and *film noir* are indeed structurally distinguished by the fundamental fact of the *voice-over*, which signals in advance the closure of the events to be narrated just as surely as it marks the operative presence of an essentially radio aesthetic which has no equivalent in the earlier novel or silent cinema. Allusions in the classical art-story to oral narrative or traditional yarn-spinning (as in Conrad) are regressive and have virtually nothing in common with this new reproducible oral aesthetic (which found its supreme embodiment in Orson Welles). One may meanwhile pursue its structural specificity by way of physiology and psychology (provided these are appropriately historicized): the visual being presumably always incomplete, the auditory determining a synchronous recognition that can be drawn on for the construction of the new forms of a radio age. The thirties aesthetic, which has stereotypically been grasped as a kind of return to realism, a reaction against the modernist impulse and a renewed politicization in the period of depression, fascism and left-wing movements alike, needs to be reconsidered in the

light of this then most modern of the media, whose possibilities fascinated Brecht and Benjamin and not much later generated the lugubrious Adorno-Horkheimer vision of the "culture industry." The triumph of Hollywood seems to have fused many of these aesthetic developments into an undifferentiated mass, which it might be desirable to disentangle by thinking of the "talkie" as being initially a kind of radio film, for example.

It is at any rate clear that the voice-over of the hard-boiled detective in general, and of Marlowe in particular, offers a specifically radio pleasure which must be paid for by the closure of the case, and which allows the novel's past tenses to resonate with doom and foreboding, marking the detective's daily life with the promise of adventure.[2] This temporal set towards language also seems to play a significant enabling role in what one may call the Flaubertian side of Chandler's stylistic production, which paradoxically marks one final unexpected development in the aesthetic of the *mot juste*. For it is precisely as the ultimate somersault of Flaubert's belief in the existence of one unique combination of words that Chandler's most outrageous effects are also to be grasped: "about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food" (FML, I, 143). This conveys Moose Molloy—already overdetermined by his gigantic frame and his outlandish clothes—not least because he is a white man in an all-black neighborhood, allowing all of Chandler's most racist caricatural instincts to begin to come into play. (The least politically correct of all our modern writers, Chandler faithfully gives vent to everything racist, sexist, homophobic and otherwise socially resentful and reactionary in the American collective unconscious, enhancing these unlovely feelings—which are, however, almost exclusively mobilized for striking and essentially visual purposes, that is to say, for aesthetic rather than political ones—by a homosexual and malebonding

[2] Radio is thus impeccably Sartrean, by which I refer to the classic discussion of narrative in *Nausea*, trans. L. Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 38–40. "Nothing happens while you live ... But everything changes when you tell about life," etc. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Oeuvres romanesques* (Paris: Pleiade, 1981), pp. 48–50.

sentimentalism that is aroused by honest cops and gangsters with hearts of gold, but finds its most open expression in the plot of *The Long Goodbye*.) The practice of the outrageous simile, whose relations to radio might also be investigated, shares with Flaubert's quite unmetaphoric handicraft of the sentence a commitment to sense-perception as what is ultimately to be rendered and set down in indelible letters: those accustomed to frequent Chandler know how many ephemeral experiences of the Southern California landscape are in his pages eternally retained in passing.[3]

At the other extreme of this production, then, we have found the problem of closure posed in terms of the system of Chandler's characters, who manage in some of the novels to project a kind of Lukácsean "effect of totality," without all of the sociological bases necessarily being touched. But this is something we can only reconstruct in retrospect by testing the completed novels for missing categories. Here are the quintessential American middle classes, for example:

> The Graysons were on the fifth floor in front, in the north wing. They were sitting together in a room which seemed to be deliberately twenty years out of date. It had fat over-stuffed furniture and brass doorknobs, shaped like eggs, a huge wall mirror in a gilt frame, a marble-topped table in the window and dark red plush side drapes by the windows. It smelled of tobacco smoke and behind that the air was telling me they had had lamb chops and broccoli for dinner. (LL, XXIII, 561).

But the Graysons ("he was a C.P.A. and looked it every inch") are virtually the only middle-class characters in all of Chandler; and they are there to show that in matters of wealth and power (their daughter has been murdered) the police cannot be counted on to protect even these most solid and respectable average citizens. As

[3] I like this one, for example, which might still "render" Southern California today: "On the highway the lights of the streaming cars made an almost solid beam in both directions. The big corn poppers were rolling north growling as they went and festooned all over with green and yellow overhang lights" (FML, IX, 176).

for the working class, Bill Chess in the same novel can be thought to stand as their "representational representative," but he is a cripple and an alcoholic and a wife-beater and makes Chandler's problem even clearer: how to convey the average and the everyday in the course of pursuing the "memorable" and the exceptional, of registering what breaks the routine, challenges the serene reproduction of the social order, counts as crime and adventure. In fact, the "lower" classes in Chandler are either impoverished petty-bourgeois or lumpens, and have their lack of money stamped on them as catastrophe. Yet the rich (with the exception of the Kingsley figure in this novel, a business executive) are in Chandler not altogether normal specimens of a conventional ruling class either...

But at this point I propose to combine the now obligatory sociological survey with a somewhat different inquiry that approaches the relationship between aesthetic value and closure or the Lukácsean "totality-effect" from a somewhat different angle. We have already suggested that what makes this particular inquiry exceptionally verifiable, for Chandler, is the presence, among the first four novels, of a book not normally thought to be one of his best, which, however, turns out, on our synoptic perspective, to contain some of the all-time best and most memorable episodes in Chandler. This is *The High Window*, whose astonishing parts (Elisha Morningstar's office, George Anson Phillips' apartment in Bunker Hill, the Vannier house) oddly do not seem to add up to the imperfect whole. It may therefore be worth trying to determine why it fails to cohere in a formal situation in which in any case the episodic is the law rather than the exception.

Mrs. Murdock's house, for example, may be a good deal less dramatic than the Sternwood estate, in opening pages that clearly attempt to reproduce the remarkable effects of *The Big Sleep's* way into the narrative (something the Grayle house only distantly tries to approximate in *Farewell, My Lovely*). But Mrs. Murdock's cantankerous port-drinking only imperfectly approximates General Sternwood's hothouse, and in any case a sumptuous house in Pasadena (with a fairly prosaic fortune) is

no match for the Sternwood oil rigs and military ancestors (nor, perhaps, in Chandler's unconscious, is an authoritarian female for an authoritative male). Meanwhile, as we have already observed, the Brasher Doubloon would seem to be a regression on the nude photographs of *The Big Sleep*, replacing the technological image with older forms of minted value and thereby threatening a slippage back into the more romantic formulas of the older Hammett narrative, with its falcons and curses. Yet on the synoptic view the episodes remain equivalents and suggest a conception of the more interesting rich which is akin to sequestration—they are withdrawn inside their expensive dwellings like injured creatures, seeking shelter and protection (a characterization that also holds for Grayle himself with his twin collections, of Fei Tsui jade and the legendary "Velma"). What it is crucial to retain of this microstructure is the relative gap and distance between the character and the setting, or rather, the way in which the character-type is itself predicated on that gap or tension. Unlike Balzac, for example, the dwelling in Chandler does not immediately express the truth of the character who dwells in it: dwelling is here not a semiotic or expressive category;[4] or perhaps it might be better to question whether these supremely privileged Chandler characters, despite their immense fortunes, are able to dwell in any traditional strong sense of the verb. They are within their rooms in a rather different way, which will for the other end of the social spectrum have its equivalency in fear and vulnerability (and which is for General Sternwood and Mrs. Murdock merely motivated and rationalized away as impotent old age and guilt, respectively).

But we must now reverse our procedure in the preceding chapter, and instead of taking an inventory of the differences in these various Chandlerian rooms, disengage from them a single archetypal space which can stand for the human dwelling as such. The reader will have already guessed that it is the office as such,

[4] "Dwelling" (Wohnen) designates an active relationship to the earth and to being, one of a primordial but also Utopian type. See Heidegger's essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" ("Bauen Wohnen Denken") in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1985), pp. 139–56.

which is in Chandler, if not a well-nigh ontological category, then at least one which subsumes a much wider variety of social activity than it is normally understood to do—indeed, the very notion that work is somehow fundamentally related to the space of an office is itself a sociologically revealing class marker. Here, to be sure, Elisa Morningstar's office and office building are among the quintessential evocations:

> The inner office was just as small but had a lot more stuff in it. A green safe almost blocked off the front half. Beyond this a heavy old mahogany table against the entrance door held some dark books, some flabby old magazines, and a lot of dust. In the back wall a window was open a few inches, without effect on the musty smell. There was a hat rack with a greasy black felt hat on it. There were three long-legged tables with glass tops and more coins under the glass tops. There was a heavy dark leather-topped desk midway of the room. It had the usual desk stuff on it, and in addition a jeweler's scales under a glass dome and two large nickel-framed magnifying glasses and a jeweler's eyepiece lying on a buff scratch pad, beside a cracked yellow silk handkerchief spotted with ink. (HW, VII, pp. 351–2)

It would be a mistake to assume that these empirical details, which document age and neglect on the one hand (the dust) and a specific professionalism (the jeweler's scales, etc.) on the other, exemplify that "reality-effect" which Barthes attributed to a realism (which, unlike his sometime anti-representational colleagues on *Tèl Quel*, he himself read with relish) that he can be said to have demystified into a realism-effect per se.[5] If in Balzac the object-world was meant to give a metonymic signal, like a wild animal's den or an exoskeleton, on the Barthesian view of Flaubert's descriptions, these last were simply meant to emit the signal "we are the real, we are reality"—by virtue of their very contingency. It was because such details (the ornate clock, the barometer) played no part in the action, and unlike their Balzacian equivalent did not mean

[5] Roland Barthes, "L'effet de réel," *Communications* 11 (March 1968), pp. 84–9.

or express anything, that they were able to stand in for the sheer massive contingency of reality itself.

But in Chandler—however often aspects of both these descriptive logics sometimes seem to function—something else also seems to be at work, which I can only characterize as the construction of a vacancy, of an empty space. Whatever the objects mean (the superannuated furniture of the Graysons, the undusted junk of Morningstar or Jessie Florian, but also the elegance of the Grayle mansion: "a nice room with large chesterfields and lounging chairs done in pale yellow leather arranged around a fireplace in front of which, on the glossy but not slippery floor, lay a rug as thin as silk and as old as Aesop's aunt" [FML, XVIII, 214]), they also outline a space of a specific type which can either be empty or contain a presence. The description of Morningstar's office which has just been quoted at some length, for example, is followed by the appearance of the "elderly party" himself in the inevitable swivel chair. But what is operative in Chandler's description of this particular office cannot be discovered empirically by an inspection of any of these enumerated details: it is, on the contrary, only ratified by Marlowe's second visit, which discloses its essential emptiness as it does the demise of its inhabitant, now just another object on the floor.

The second visit in Chandler, indeed, the return at night, under modified conditions, suggests that it is not particularly the criminal who needs this reassurance, but the detective and the novelist who pass their specific realities in review, and by rotating them throughout a variety of situations (as Monet did with his haystacks) cause them to emerge ever more strongly as formal entities. There is, for example, the date with the ill-fated Harry Jones in *his* dilapidated office:

> The lighted oblong of an uncurtained window faced me, cut by the angle of a desk. On the desk a hooded typewriter took form, then the metal knob of a communicating door. This was unlocked. I passed into the second of the three offices. Rain rattled suddenly against the closed window. Under its noise I crossed the room. A tight fan of light spread

> from an inch opening of the door into the lighted office. Everything very convenient. I walked like a cat on a mantel and reached the hinged side of the door, put an eye to the crack and saw nothing but light against the angle of the wood. (BS, XXVI, 104)

Even more strikingly, there is the return to the cabin at Fawn Lake, which presents the psychically or psychoanalytically interesting structure of the repetition of a repetition (the first return is surprised by the local sheriff, lying in wait for Marlowe in the dark). But then, stubbornly Marlowe goes back again:

> Three hundred yards from the gate a narrow track, sifted over with brown oak leaves from last fall, curved around a granite boulder and disappeared. I followed it around and bumped along the stones of the outcrop for fifty or sixty feet, then swung the car around a tree and set it pointing back the way it had come. I cut the lights and switched off the motor and sat there waiting. (LL, XII, 519)

I want to use this particular synoptic equivalence for a structural deduction that may well seem an outrageous leap: it will involve the proposition that for Chandler's narrative economy the vacant murder cabin functions less as a dwelling place, even a former dwelling place, than as a kind of figurative office in its own right—the "office" of those in flight; for example, the pseudonymous Muriel Chess before the novel opens, and at the end, Kingsley and finally Degarmo himself. The point of this formal deduction lies in problematizing the common sense or "natural" conception of dwelling as such in Chandler; its advantage, for instance, will lie in retroactively transforming our first sub-form—the "dwellings" of the rich (the hothouse of General Sternwood, the jade collection of Grayle, Mrs. Murdock's port-drinking room)—into spaces of retreat and withdrawal which are somehow more analogous to offices than to houses or even quarters or apartments. There follows thereby a prodigious "metaphysical" or philosophical expansion of the category of the office per se in Chandler, whereby we may now return on his other city spaces in order to test them

against this one, which is derived (it will be remembered) from some initial distance between the "person" and his or her space, in other words, from the calling into question structurally of the identity within the act of "dwelling" between character and spatial housing or envelope.

But at that point it becomes clear that a second narratively very significant group of Chandlerian former dwellings at once now explicitly demand subsumption under the enlarged figurative category of the office: these are the sumptuous private houses of the various gigolos, from that of Lindsay Marriott in *Farewell, My Lovely*, hidden away above the coast highway ("It was a nice little house with a salt-tarnished spiral of staircase going up to the front door..." [FML, VIII, 168ff.]), to that—classically and repetitively "revisited" in the above sense—in which Vannier lives and dies in *The High Window* (see HW, XXIX, 437ff.) and its immediate, structurally varied replay in the "dwelling" of Chris Lavery in *The Lady in the Lake* (LL, III, 480ff.; XV–XVI, 531ff.; XX, 552ff.), both of which include what we may call complementary or mirror-image "revisits" analogous to that involving the murder in the office next door of Harry Jones by Canino in *The Big Sleep*. But clearly the principle that these luxuriously appointed private dwellings are to be considered offices can be persuasively argued from the source of the livelihood of the various males who use them as places to meet the wealthy women on whom they prey: at which point retroactively the Geiger house in the inaugural *Big Sleep* also comes to range itself under this category (underscoring the peculiar slippage, in Chandler's unconscious, between male homosexuality and high-class male "prostitution," whose gigolo practitioners he seems to have felt to be somehow "effeminate" as well).

Yet if we consider that the Geiger house—itself also like Monet's cathedrals seen under a variety of weathers, from driving rain via afternoon sunlight to moonlit night—is something like a professional office in the way in which it houses Geiger's other line of "work," namely nude photographs taken with a view towards blackmail, then this new kind of extension leads on into a further sub-category with a rich new harvest of appropriate examples.

Such are indeed virtually any of the institutional spaces provided in Chandler for the satisfaction of the (other) "vices" of the rich: not merely Geiger's "other" office, the pornographic bookstore, but also and above all the casinos and gambling joints in which his various heiresses run up illicit IOUs and are subsequently blackmailed—from the Cypress Club (in *The Big Sleep*) through its various avatars in *Farewell, My Lovely* (the Belvedere Club) and *The High Window* (Eddie Prue's Idle Valley Club, which knows a virtually posthumous formal reappearance in *The Long Goodbye*) to the wartime *Lady in the Lake* which can only offer the London-style male club as a structural substitute. Even here, however, in this general sub-category, in the gradual enlargement of the private club or casino into a whole closed enclave of the private development with its gates and private police, we witness something like a replay (or to use the new Chandlerian category, a "playback") of the transformation in reverse of dwelling into office. Now at once even more illicit needs associate themselves with these, in particular the drug sources: from the relatively high class doctors' offices (Amthor in *Farewell, My Lovely*, Almore in *The Lady in the Lake*) to the Bay City dope houses or "private hospitals," such as Dr. Sonderborg's in *Farewell, My Lovely*, a return movement that might well lead us on into the even seedier lobbies of the various Chandlerian hotels (a combination tryst-space and run-down dwelling, the Prescott Hotel in San Bernadino, is extensively explored and deployed in LL, XIII, 523ff.), that now eject us back, at the other end of this rather skewed class spectrum, into the lower ladder of the impoverished petty bourgeoisie in the various offices or dwelling spaces of the down-and-out.

(The shift has literally been acted out for us in the illicit transfer of Geiger's pornographic loan library from the bookstore on Las Palmas to the unlucky Brody's rundown apartment on Randall Place [BS, X, 32–3].)

As has been suggested above, *The High Window* is uniquely interesting for the way in which it yields a double-barreled identification of both these variants, in Elisha Morningstar's office and George Anson Phillips' virtually archetypal Bunker Hill murder

room, a dwelling which is once again for a classical loser of his stamp both private and public all at once and does double duty for an office in the literal sense (he makes an appointment there with Marlowe).

Leaving aside the peculiar extension of this not-so-genteel misery, filled with broken furniture and dust, to the various offices of Chandlerian police officers, crooked and honest alike, it becomes clear that at the end of this particular structural sequence of forms we suddenly reemerge into familiar territory, which is, however, hereby dramatically and unexpectedly transformed. For the final office we necessarily confront at the conclusion of this lengthy inventory can only be Marlowe's own, the romantic overtones of which are as indistinguishable from his unique persona in much the same structural fashion as the other social character-types are "identified" with their particular spaces—which is to say also, as we have repeatedly attempted to demonstrate, that they and he are also at a certain structural distance from those urban places as well. (We have, in other words, neither the Balzacian organic identification, nor the Flaubertian-Sartrean radical contingency, but a kind of substitution of an architectural language for that of individual characters: it is not so much that these "people" in Chandler are their spaces, as that in Chandler these spaces are "characters" or *actants*.)

As for Marlowe himself, as is well known,[6] we begin with the classical private eye's office at 615 Cahuenga Blvd., an ostentatiously empty and dust-filled space without a secretary in the inevitable outer office (where only bills arrive in the mail), which is archetypally a place of waiting (for clients, for phone calls, for envelopes or packages you mail back to yourself) in which, in an equally typically Chandlerian displacement, this particular plot function is used as a cover or a structural pretext for urban or ecological perception, a monadic window from which something of the deeper truth of Los Angeles is able to be disclosed:

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[6] An indispensable aid to these sites is available in the form of "The Raymond Chandler Mystery Map," published by Aaron Blake Publishers (1800 S. Robertson Bldvd., Suite 130, Los Angeles, California 90035) (1985).

> It was getting dark outside now. The rushing sound of the traffic had died a little and the air from the open window, not yet cool from the night, had that tired end-of-the-day smell of dust, automobile exhaust, sunlight rising from hot walls and sidewalks, the remote smell of food in a thousand restaurants, and perhaps, drifting down from the residential hills above Hollywood—if you had a nose like a hunting dog—a touch of that peculiar tomcat smell that eucalyptus trees give off in warm weather. (HW, XIII, 372)

According to the economy we have described above, it will come as no particular surprise to find that Marlowe's living quarters (the Bristol Apartments on Bristol Ave., then the Hobart Arms at Franklin and Renmore) become something like extensions of his office in this respect. What it is crucial to observe is that we may deduce a momentous change, not merely in Chandler's narrative form itself, but in the history and the social relations from which the particular narrative shape of his content springs, when, as has been observed in *The Long Goodbye*, we find that he has moved from the classical urban apartment building into a private home: "I was living that year in a house on Yucca Avenue in the Laurel Canyon district. It was a small hillside house on a dead-end street with a long flight of redwood steps to the front door and a grove of eucalyptus trees along the way..." It is the end of an era: and the moment at which Marlowe's marriage (to money) and relocation to La Jolla become unexpectedly imaginable.

II

The system we have initially traced through here—our first, essentially synchronic one—now suggests two further comments. The first has to do with closure as such, for there can be no question that this particular "map" of the social totality is a complete and closed semiotic system on its own terms: unified by the category of the "office," its various positions and inversions are able in a satisfactory and satisfying manner to span the breadth of the

social system from wealth to poverty and (in the area of crime and vice) from public to private. This is, to be sure, an ideologically motivated vision or scale-model of the social, which strategically omits or represses production as such, along with the law-abiding average peaceful middle classes themselves (although it would be a mistake to imply thereby that any non-ideological, "scientific," representationally adequate map of the social could be imagined to take its place—following Althusser's definition of ideology,[7] all visions of the social in this sense will be equally ideological, although not equivalent in political or even aesthetic value).

But the very closure of this system now presents a problem in its own right. We have so far largely followed the implications of a classical structuralist aesthetic, which tended to conflate structural systematicity and aesthetic value, or at least the aesthetic effect of formal closure and formal satisfaction: although it is nowhere very explicitly argued (Barthes comes closest in various passing remarks), the suggestion is that a work or a narrative is felt to be completed when it has been able to touch all the bases in some underlying semiotic system; that unconscious cognitive acknowledgement of systematicity is then transferred to the surface of the work of art, which can be pronounced in one way or another a full form, a completed thing.[8] Indeed, all four of Chandler's first novels (with the few specific historical modifications we have registered for *The Lady in the Lake*) touch all these bases and are in that sense very complete itineraries throughout the social system of the Chandlerian cognitive map.

But that is precisely the problem, since we started from the (not merely personal) impression that *The High Window* was somehow, despite the rare quality and intensity of some of its individual episodes, distinctly less satisfying as an overall narrative than the

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[7] The reference is to the addendum to Althusser's essay "Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971).

[8] But see, for a more orthodox application of the structuralist aesthetic, my "Spatial Systems in *North by Northwest*," in S. Žižek, ed., *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (London: Verso, 1992).

other three. How is this now to be accounted for, given the operation in this particular novel of the same social and semiotic system we have found at work in the other novels and to which we have been tempted to attribute their value and aesthetic effect?

The obvious first step lies in a critique of the limits of what we have done so far, but it proposes a twofold critique, both empirical and methodological. We may begin by seeing what was omitted from the previous system, but we should not neglect the possibility that it is the very way in which the semiotic concept of a system is framed that may be at work here. In the first case, it is conceivable that another system might be constructed and projected which would not be altogether coterminous with the first, and which might allow the difference between *The High Window* and the other novels to become visible. In the second case, the dissatisfaction with our analytic results would tend to move us towards a more general critique of semiotics as such, as a system which is capable of including or processing certain kinds of materials of a uniform type, whether these be semes or realities. Such a critique of semiotics would not then automatically lead the critic to posit an alternative type of system, but rather, more dialectically, to designate conceptualities or reflexivities, negativities, absences, which do not register on the essentially positivistic apparatus of the semiotic recording device.

I think, for example, of some of the truly wondrous effects in *The Lady in the Lake* which can scarcely be conveyed by the sociospatial notations we have devised so far, because they derive from the shock of a radical shift in worlds altogether: not from their unexpected relationship so much as from a sudden perception of their radical incompatibility. This is the moment, for instance, in which Marlowe makes his way down from Fawn Lake, where he has discovered a dead body, explored the tourist village and the cabins, had lengthy encounters with the local sheriff, and finally interrogated the rather seedy bellhops in the hotel in San Bernadino where the fleeing suspect is likely to have spent the night. The next day, in Bay City (Santa Monica), he visits the expensive home of one of those playboys we have already mentioned, which stands

across the street from the equally expensive home (or "office") of a shady society doctor. But the shift is so extraordinary as to make us imagine we have opened the pages of a different novel: something like a generic-ontological discontinuity, a well-nigh phenomenological substitution of worlds, which are for that reason not merely to be described in simple social terms. Lavery, for instance, has visited the lake; the Kingsleys, whose cabin Marlowe went to see, clearly inhabit both worlds, which can scarcely be seen as city and country in the older agricultural sense, but at best in terms of an opposition between tourist industry and workplace. Still, what used to be called nature must somehow be in play here, if only because of the deployment of mountain roads and the extraordinary visuals of the drowned body, which first "waves" hesitatingly beneath the water and then boils up to the surface along with accompanying objects ("an ancient rotted plank popped suddenly through the surface, struck out a full foot of its jagged end, and fell back with a flat slap and floated off" [LL, VI, 499]). Even the ending—the soldiers on guard on the bridge across the Puma Lake dam—bears witness to an unusual semic combination of history, nature, and human production rare even in Chandler.

In this respect it is also worth recalling other combinations of motifs in these novels which one might have been tempted to think of as purely aesthetic or formal, but which in this context now begin to come before us as the insistence, through a purely social-typological fabric, of other orders of being or reality. These are the color motifs, by which people and their settings (Vivian Regan's "white" apartment, the "gray" insistently associated with Eddie Mars) are as it were reunified into metaphorical *actants* in which the relationship between characters and space or furniture is relatively more organic and quite different from the tensions and syncopated inconsistencies described above. And these combinations give us the secret of the meteorological rhythms noted in the preceding chapter, for example, in *The Big Sleep* itself, where a host of precise and vivid indications signals the change of weather from scene to scene, thereby reuniting the interior chapters, the indoor experiences as it were, to the atmospheric unity of the Los Angeles

basin as a whole. Here too then, a different kind of "totalization" can be found at work, which has nothing to do with the overall plot itself or with the social-character system, but which somehow sketches in the presence of some vaster absent natural unity beyond this ephemeral set of episodes in punctual human time.

In any case, Los Angeles has so often been thought of as a different kind of city—sunbelt megalopolis of the future, portending fundamental changes in the classical urban structure and incorporating modern transportation media in new structural ways—that it is worth allowing for the possibility that (quite unlike Hammett's San Francisco, for example) this particular deployment of the "urban" includes nature in a dialectically different way which may escape the older kinds of semic oppositions.

Everything that has been said so far, however, suggests that we have an interest in trying to think of these formal peculiarities in Chandler according to some scheme which flexes dualisms while remaining deeply suspicious of them, and which programmatically avoids the attribution of any a priori content to terms hitherto implicitly predefined by such traditional oppositions as subject and object or culture and nature.

At least one contemporary aesthetic—that of Heidegger in "The Origin of the Work of Art"[9]—would seem capable of offering a way of theorizing this dual system in Chandler; and if the conjunction between German philosophy and the hard-boiled American detective story seems incongruous, the "nationalistic" flavor of Heidegger's essay should be recalled, which assimilates the inaugural "poetic" act in question to the comparable philosophical act (the deconcealment of Being) and also to the act of political revolution (the inauguration of a new society, the production or invention of radically new social relations). Los Angeles has, however, so often been praised or damned as a mutation in urban relations, and Chandler so often identified as the novelist par excellence of this new megacity, that the latter's work necessarily raises issues about the collective or protopolitical dimensions

[9] In Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 139–212.

of art which are really not as far from Heidegger's concerns as the latter's rather traditional examples (the Greek temple, the Mörike lyric, the Van Gogh painting) might lead us to think (the ultimate identification of the figure of Hölderlin by the philosopher unites collective identities, politics, landscape and the social in a more suggestive and modern way).

At any rate the two systems we have begun to identify in Chandler's narratives find a certain articulation in Heidegger's description of the work of art, which emerges, according to him, from (or within) a "rift" between what he calls World and Earth—terms we can rewrite for our own purposes as the dimensions of History and the social project on the one hand, and Nature or matter on the other (ranging from geographical or ecological constraints all the way to the individual body). The force of Heidegger's account lies in the way in which a constitutive gap between these two dimensions is maintained and even systematically enlarged: the implication is that we all live in both dimensions at once, in some irreconcilable simultaneity, at all moments both in History and in Matter, at one and the same time historical beings and "natural" ones, living simultaneously in the meaning-endowment of the historical project and in the meaninglessness of organic life. But this in turn implies not only that no philosophical or aesthetic synthesis between these dimensions is attainable, but also that "idealism" or "metaphysics" can be defined by this impossible project, whose logical alternatives are marked out by the obliteration of history and its assimilation to Nature, or by the transformation of all forms of natural resistance into human, historical terms. For the Heideggerian position, then, such conceptual mystifications or mirages have their aesthetic and critical equivalents as well: in the various "symbolic" concepts of the work of art, similar repressive or masking strategies are at work, in which naturalization or humanization result in the production of unified or organic symbols of various kinds. One would then be tempted to characterize Heidegger's aesthetic as "allegorical," in its repudiation of the mirage of symbolic unification and its insistence on the constitutive rift, gap, distance or discontinuity within the work

itself. Heidegger's identification of the subject/object opposition as the categorical fall into "Western metaphysics" and the loss of Being can be grasped as the attempt to translate the World/Earth gap into some more manageable dualism.

From this perspective, not only can the work of art not be called upon to heal this fundamental "rift" in our being between World and Earth, or History and Nature; its vocation lies quite the contrary in the holding open of just that scandalous rift, in the affirmation, or better still, the active staging, of the gap between these two realms, a gap which alone—in the Heideggerian mode of speech—allows each of them to be what it is: for the first time allows Earth or matter to be felt as profoundly material, and History or World to be sensed in all its historicity. The function of the work of art is then to open a space in which we are ourselves called upon to live *within* this tension and to affirm its reality.

Yet Heidegger's illustrations—visual, architectural or lyric—do not give us a very clear idea of how the novel or narrative generally could be modeled in terms of this description, or what the latter might produce in the way of practical criticism of individual texts (even if it were able to generate some normative "aesthetic" of the novel as a form). Chandler's novels seem to me extremely suggestive for precisely this task, since their reading entails a perpetual shifting back and forth between two systems and two "isotopies" (or levels of attention) which are given in advance as irreconcilable, and which can therefore presumably only *alternate*. But this alternation cannot be simply conceived as that between two social worlds, such as the world of Fawn Lake as it were, versus the world of Altair St. in Bay City. But this is not yet a satisfactory way of reformulating the Heideggerian "gap," since in his initial version both sides of the tension seemed to be given us in the terms of the one, the Earth, while in our translation, it is the opposite term World which has extended across the chasm and drawn its other back into uniformity.

Heidegger's deployment of his opposition at the moment in which he touches on the art object as such can point a way out of this dilemma: it is the materiality of the object, he tells us, the

sonority of the language, the smoothness of the marble, or the slick density of the oil paint, which marks the part of Earth in it; while it is the semiotic features of the work, the meanings and meaningfulness—what is paraphrasable in the verse, the functions of the building, the object imitated by the painting—which are the share in it of World as such. What seems crucial here and specifically Heideggerian is that the opposition between Earth and World be understood as irreducible in the last instance, no matter how greatly each becomes implicated in the other, no matter how crushing the preponderance of one term in their struggle. Thus, the work of art itself, although exhibited in that worldly place which is the museum, and drawn into a web of social and worldly relationships—those of sale and investment, interpretation and evaluation, pedagogy, tradition, sacred reference—must always somehow scandalously exceed all those worldly relationships in the ultimate and irreducible materiality of its earthly element that cannot become social, the color that cannot be made altogether human. In the same way, clearly, its emergence as a kind of aerolith in sheer space—a meteor from the void, taking a place, being measurable, weighing, being accessible to the physical senses—can never quite entitle it to full inert status as a thing among other things. Allegorically, indeed, this primal opposition in Heidegger's aesthetic can be read as a refusal of fundamental philosophical dualisms while acknowledging the inevitability of their existence and persistence: the meanings of World suggesting any number of idealisms in which reality is thought to have been successfully assimilated to Mind once and for all, while the resistance of Earth marks the resurgence of the various materialisms that try to stage their sense of the fragility of meanings in physical reality by way of meaningful words. The ontology that wishes to escape ideological imprisonment in either idealism or materialism can then only do so by foretelling the inevitable temptations of both and using them against each other in a permanent tension that cannot be resolved.

We will suggest, then, that World, from the Heideggerian perspective, be understood in another terminology as History itself, that is to say, as the ensemble of acts and efforts whereby human

beings have attempted, since the dawn of a human age, to bring meanings out of the limits and constraints of their surroundings. Earth, meanwhile, is everything meaningless in those surroundings and what betrays the resistance and inertia of sheer Matter as such and extends as far as what human beings have named as death, contingency, accident, bad luck or finitude. What is distinctive about Heidegger's proposal is then the insistence, not merely that these two "dimensions" of reality are radically incommensurable with each other, and somehow unrelatable in terms of either, but also that philosophy, and following it, aesthetics, and perhaps even politics as well, must now find its specific vocation, not in the attempt to paper over the difference or to mystify it and theorize it away, so much as to exacerbate and hold it open as an ultimate situation of unresolvable tension (I avoid the word "contradiction," since it is so often wrongly felt to promise its own resolution in idealist fashion).

This is the perspective in which the work of art emerges, not to heal this rift or even to assuage what is seen as an incurable wound in our very being, this gap between History and Matter, or World and Earth. Rather, the great or authentic works (for Heidegger's aesthetic, like aesthetic systems as such, necessarily includes a normative moment) are those whose vocation consists in holding the two incommensurable dimensions apart and in allowing us thereby to glimpse them simultaneously in all their scandalous irreconcilability: in other words to grasp Earth or matter in all its irreducible materiality, even and particularly where we have been thinking about it in terms of meaning and human and social events; and to grasp World or history in its most fundamental historicities even where we have been assuming it to be inert nature or non-social landscape. Although its aesthetic relevance would have been utterly alien and repugnant to him, Adorno captured the spirit of this alternation-in-tension aptly in another context, when he recommended that we constantly defamiliarize our philosophies of human history by rethinking them in terms of natural history, and demystify our positivistic impressions of natural history by thinking that through again in historicist and social ways. But

in Heidegger, at least in these privileged instances among which the work of art is numbered, the alternation becomes a blinding simultaneity, both incompatible dimensions now momentarily coexisting.

The rift in Chandler, however, if we are able to posit one, can surely not take on so benign an appearance as the opening of a human and a social drama out onto an essentially natural landscape, particularly since that landscape has already been itself fully humanized by the process of urban construction, and also since the social system we have discovered at work in Chandler has already tended to endow itself with spatial expression, so that the character-types are already at least styles of architecture and gardening, and associated with specific neighborhoods or even ecologies (as Reyner Banham called them). Nothing is indeed quite so depressingly human or social as the tourist industry itself, so that the distinctive phenomenological "world" we have posited for Fawn Lake cannot have much to do with its survival as the sheerly natural and inhuman, as over against the world of human streets and occupations and passions down below. Yet Fawn Lake is in another sense something like the end of a trajectory, a point beyond which neither writer nor character can seem to go, and which marks the end of the road by being somehow beyond it. We may indeed here want to recall the equally memorable ending of *Farewell, My Lovely*, which, also couched in the language of distance or space, seems to attempt to transcend it by canceling it out: "It was a cool day and very clear. You could see a long way—but not as far as Velma had gone" (FML, XL, 315). But it is not because Fawn Lake is associated with death after the fashion of this last sentence that we reach the end of the road as such, but rather the other way around: it is because of the spatial peculiarity and involution that the theme of death can win back such power of evocation.

It will be instructive here to pass from a novel which is on the formal level a relative failure (*The High Window*), from which Nature, this "end of the road," is missing, to what is surely Chandler's best book.

Farewell, My Lovely is Chandler's most ambitious novel, as well as his most romantic; and it thereby offers as promising an occasion as any other for an examination of what, in the enumeration of the separate and specific episodes, seems to exceed that socio-typological system we synoptically abstracted from the superposition of the four novels upon each other. It has the space of the rich (the Grayles, to be sure less fully developed than in *The Big Sleep* or *The High Window*); the space of poverty and marginalized people and things (Jesse Florian's house); it includes one of the memorable playboy villas, that of Marriott somewhere in between Geiger's house and the various gigolo establishments; along with the usual gambling casinos; several distinctive dens of vice (Amthor's oddly modernistic dwelling and Dr. Sonderborg's "hospital"); and also several different police offices, with some visits to Marlowe's own. But Chandler tried to move, not always successfully, into new territory here; the unresolved episode of Anne Riordan introduces the possibility of a partnership-romance to which Chandler will not return until Marlowe's marriage. Meanwhile, Marlowe is in this one knocked out several times, by a blow to the head and by drugs—something Dick Powell exploited memorably in his film version (*Murder, My Sweet*, directed by Edward Dmytryk, 1944), but which is less consistent with the premium placed on disabused lucidity by the voice-over format. Indeed, it seems to me that we may well here find ourselves in the presence of a first clue: in the rare attempt to draw the non-conscious into a narrative—the other of conscious observation and of as it were a signed "point of view"—Chandler was generally careful to keep at a certain generic distance from the adventure format (where, as in Dick Francis, the hero is regularly beaten up, tortured, pursued, etc.).

There is also a way in which such moments—which imitate death itself in the way in which the conscious or named personality touches on its own end or extinction—do something to the space at which they occur. Sonderborg's "hospital" is to be sure not so metaphorically outside the world, but Marlowe's first bout of unconsciousness is even more interesting. It takes place literally at the end of a road, at the dead end of an unbuilt street beyond

which Marlowe and Marriott are supposed to rendezvous with the thieves who have offered to sell back Mrs. Grayle's Fei Tsui jade. The place, called Purissima Canyon, is marked "by a white fence of four-by-fours" (FML, IX, 176) at the end of the paved street; and this white wooden barrier (like the memorable wood fence in Antonioni's *Blowup*), which is neither symbol nor contingent reality-effect, neither expressive semiotic nor social sign, is surely one of the most fascinating and enigmatic objects in all of Chandler, as though it somehow marked the end of the world itself.

But if this is what we are looking for, any reader of *Farewell, My Lovely* knows that its ultimate strong form is to be found elsewhere in that novel—in the dramatic closing sequence on the gambling boats moored out beyond the three-mile jurisdictional limit, riding on the open sea in front of Bay City. These boats—immense floating casinos—are indeed virtually as far from Los Angeles as one ever gets in Chandler (save in the last two novels, where we touchdown in Kansas [*The Little Sister*] and Mexico [*The Long Goodbye*] respectively):

> A faint music came over the water and music over the water can never be anything but lovely. The *Royal Crown* seemed to ride as steady as a pier on its four hawsers. Its landing stage was lit up like a theater marquee. Then all this faded into remoteness and another, older, smaller boat began to sneak out of the night towards us. It was not much to look at. A converted seagoing freighter with scummed and rusted plates, the superstructure cut down to the boat deck level, and above that two stumpy masts just high enough for a radio antenna. There was light on the *Montecito* also and music floated across the wet dark sea. The spooning couples took their teeth out of each other's necks and stared at the ship and giggled. (FML, XXXV, 286)

To be sure, social relations onboard are not much different from those we have left behind (Brunette here standing in for the stock Chandler type of the likeable gangster with a heart of gold), but Marlowe's adventuresome arrival has all the mythic qualities of

the perilous journey, the passage to another realm or world, while the sea itself, here in the essentially urban Chandler, glitters with all that mineral fascination, that radically non-human, cold, even unnatural mystery that the ocean often has in writers who do not specialize in sea-stories, or in cultures which are non-maritime. This is to say that—particularly as we do not fantasize Los Angeles as a port city (unlike Hammett's San Francisco as it memorably greets the arrival of the *La Paloma*)—the liquid element is here not within the narrative world, not a part of its semiotic system, but rather what lies beyond it and cancels it as such. We need a stronger negative for this unimaginable exterior face of the monad (that we can ourselves only witness from within, as a complete world, for us precisely *without* limits), particularly since the inner system is itself made up of a host of differentiated negations (contraries and contradictories alike), about which what one wants to say is that they too—negatives as well as positives alike, all swept up together in a jumble of semic existents—are what this chill outer realm refuses and repudiates. Nor is it really worthwhile pronouncing the very word Otherness, which so strongly reaffirms its secret internal relations with the thing itself. The sea is here cleansed even of otherness; and it would be tempting to associate it with death itself, that non-place and non-space where Velma goes, and where the big sleep of the earlier novel is slept. But even this strikes me as a sentimentalism, and the attribution of an inner-worldly content to a non-space whose very function it is—anti-semiotic yet poetic all at the same time—very precisely to revive even the word death and to lend it a specific and hauntingly Chandlerian tone.

In other words, death itself in Chandler is something like a spatial concept, a spatial construction; as is nature, when at its farthest verge—staring down into the uncommon depths of Fawn Lake—it touches on the outer edge of Being itself. We find here therefore the operation of a second system or dimension in coordination yet in tension all at once with the first socio-semiotic one: this last organized people and their dwellings into a cognitive map of Los Angeles that Marlowe could be seen to canvass, pushing

the doorbells of so many social types, from the great mansions to the junk-filled rooms on Bunker Hill or West 54th Place. But this dimension—in Heideggerian language the level of "World" in the Chandlerian narrative—has no grounding or resonance unless it circulates slowly against the rotation of that other deeper anti-system which is that of Earth itself in Chandler, and which can include space and "nature" only at the price of transcending it and enveloping it in its own global negation, coupling it with the non-space of the outer limit, the white wooden barrier at the end of the world.

In retrospect, this ultimate dimension can be detected retroactively in *The Big Sleep* as well, and not only in the oil derricks that seem to mark the seam between a prehistoric nature and the fitful traces of heroic political history in this social world which, after the deeds of Rusty Regan's IRA or the General's Mexican War ancestor, seems in a state or condition of the most feeble survival, warming itself in its own decadence with so many forms of vice (it will, however, be the last time in Chandler's work that this particular elegiac note is sounded). But one fails to come to terms with the peculiar form of this narrative, that can at first seem broken-backed and clumsily divided in half, when the search for Eddie Mars' wife is suddenly substituted for the completion of the Geiger matter, unless we see that the garage in which the fugitive is held is itself yet another such place at the very edge of Being.

> A mile or so east of Realito a road turns towards the foothills. That's Orange County to the south but to the north it's as bare as hell's back yard and smack up against the hills there's a cyanide plant where they make the stuff for fumigation. Just off the highway there's a small garage and paintshop run by a gee named Art Huck. Hot car drop, likely. There's a frame house beyond this, and beyond the house nothing but the foothills and the bare stone outcrop and the cyanide plant a couple of miles on. That's the place where she's holed up. They turned off on this road and Joe swung around and went back and we saw the car turn off the road where the frame house was. We sat there half an hour looking through the cars going by. Nobody came back out. (BS, XXVII, 110)

Indeed, another kind of inquiry might want to make some connections between this spatial involution and the intermittent visions of Evil in Chandler (for not the least original feature of his modification of the detective story is that his crimes do without villains; or if you prefer that the villains are social—police corruption—rather than antisocial in the conventional meaning of this word). But here, in the remote garage, we find the more sinister Canino, who poisoned Harry Jones and prepares to torture Marlowe to death; his function is, however, not finally to supply us with a villain and with evil, but rather, like the space itself, to stand as the absolute other and the negation of that true but human and inner worldly murder which is the shooting of Regan (and indeed the source of the other violent crimes throughout the novel). Meanwhile, as for nature itself, as though the remote location of the hideaway were not enough, and in the spirit of the meteorology of the other chapters, Chandler drowns this one in pouring rain, deep inland restoring the watery element that is the sign of the non-human axis of matter in these novels.

I claim, indeed, that it is this opening onto the not-World, onto its edge and its end, in the void, in non-human space, in death, that is the ultimate secret of Chandelarian narrative. For the final element in his characteristic form is that the underlying crime is always old, lying half-forgotten in the pasts of the characters before the book begins. This is the principal reason why the reader's attention is diverted from it: he assumes it to be part of the dimension of the present, of the events going on before him in the immediacy of his narrated universe. Instead, it is buried in that world's past, in time, among the dead evoked in the memorable closing page of *The Big Sleep*.

And suddenly the purely intellectual effect of Chandler's construction formula is metamorphized into a result of unmistakable aesthetic intensity. From the point of view of abstract curiosity we might expect the reader to have a reaction not altogether unmixed: satisfaction at the solution of the puzzle, irritation at having been misled through so much extraneous material which

had no real bearing on it. And on the aesthetic level the irritation remains, but transfigured.

For now, at the end, all the events of the book are seen in a new and depressing light: all that energy and activity wasted to find somebody who had in reality been dead for so long, for whom the time of the present was little more than a process of slow physical dissolution. And suddenly, at the thought of that dissolution, and of the mindless lack of identity of the missing person so long called by name, the very appearance of life itself, of time in the present, of the bustling activity of the outside world, is stripped away and we feel in its place the presence of graves beneath the bright sunlight; the present fades to little more than a dusty, once-lived moment which will quickly take its place in the back years of an old newspaper file. And our formal distraction at last serves its fundamental purpose: by diverting us with the ritual generic aim of the detection of the criminal and of his transformation into the Other, it is able to bring us up short, without warning, against the reality of death itself, stale death, reaching out to remind the living of its own moldering resting place.